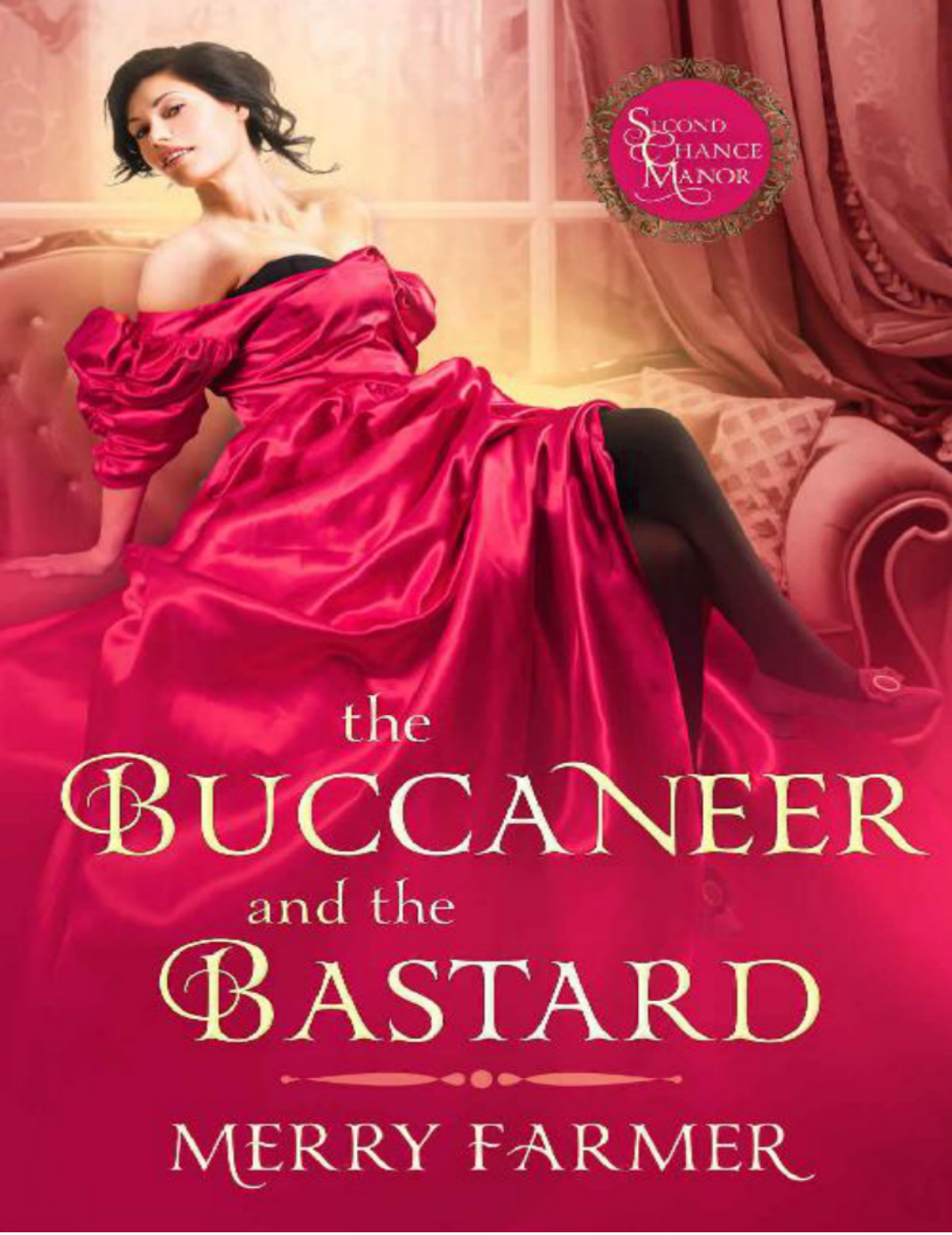

Second Chance Manor
the
BUCCANEER
and the
BASTARD
MERRY FARMER

The Buccaneer and the Bastard

Merry Farmer

THE BUCCANEER AND THE BASTARD

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Chapter 1

Fangfoss Manor - Week Two of the house party, before most of the engagements happened....

Frank Crymble was at the end of his rope. He stood in the foyer of Fangfoss Manor, staring at the telegram that had just been delivered to him, along with his employer, Lord Avery O'Shea, the Earl of Carnlough's mail. The telegram contained only a few words, but they spelled doom for Frank. The Australian railroad scheme had failed. His investment was obliterated. All of the money he'd saved up through years of serving as his half-cousin's valet and enjoying the generosity of the O'Shea family—who weren't required to recognize him at all, let alone secretly treat him as a member of the family, even though he was born on the wrong side of the bed—was gone.

He blinked and stared at the telegram again, just in case the words would somehow change, but no such luck. His heart raced as every implication of the railroad's failure gripped him. So much for his plans to make something of himself in spite of the awkwardness of his birth.

Off to one side, Fangfoss's butler cleared his throat. Frank snapped his eyes up at the dour man, then twisted and glanced down the hall at the chatter of some of the female guests attending the summer house party Lord and Lady Fangfoss were hosting. The butler's frown made perfect sense. It would be unseemly for the valet of one of the guests to be caught above-stairs, where any of the more genteel guests might spot him and be offended by his lowliness.

With a frown of his own, Frank nodded to the butler, then hurried down the hall, taking one of the smaller, side halls to the stairs that would lead him down to the servants' hall via a route that would avoid the high-born ladies. He had a feeling Fangfoss's butler had an ulterior motive for keeping him out of sight of the titled houseguests. With his red hair, green eyes, and distinctive facial features, there was no hiding the fact that he was a blood-relation of Lord Carnlough. In fact, earlier in the party Mr. Phineas Prince had mistaken him for Avery. Prince hadn't seemed to mind, and Frank was used to being mistaken for an O'Shea—he *was* an O'Shea, even though he didn't share their name—but the butler had balked at the truth. The man had made it clear without saying so that he didn't want Frank disturbing the guests with the inconvenient reality that not every well-born lady was as pure as the driven snow, and that sometimes

accidents happened.

The thought hardened Frank's jaw as he found the servants' stairs and headed down to the hall. He was not a mistake and he damn well would not be considered an embarrassment. He stared at the telegram again as he tucked Avery's mail into his jacket pocket, then balled the disappointing scrap of paper up and threw it into the rubbish bin just inside the doorway to the kitchen. He was a clever man with dreams and the grit to chase after them. He could have resigned himself to a life of lowliness, living off of the charity of his half-family, but he'd decided long ago that he wouldn't be satisfied with that. He'd scrimped and saved his money, pooled his resources, researched and calculated, and eventually invested in the Australian railroad in the hope that the scheme would finally change his fortunes. Just because it was a failure didn't mean he was.

"Cheer up, lad," Mrs. Seymour, Fangfoss's cook, told him from the counter in the center of the room, where she and the kitchen maid, Nancy, were chopping vegetables for that night's supper as though someone were standing over them with a watch. "It can't be all that bad."

"I'm afraid it is, Mrs. Seymour," Frank said, pushing a hand through his unruly hair. "I've just lost a great deal of money."

"Oh," Nancy said with round-eyed sympathy. "I'm sorry." She sent Frank a smile that was meant to be sweet and tempting.

Frank smiled back at her, but not too broadly. Nancy had been sweet on him since he'd arrived with Avery and Angeline, as had several of the other maids, but he had too much respect for the integrity of the young women working at Fangfoss Manor to lead them on—unlike some of the other male servants who had traveled with some of the houseguests. Some of the houseguests themselves, if he were honest. Besides which, there was only one woman that had haunted Frank's dreams since the moment he'd arrived in Yorkshire, and that woman was thoroughly off-limits.

Miss Melanie Pennypacker. She was gorgeous, with her raven-black hair and blue eyes, she was clever, she was American, and she was thoroughly out of his reach. But that hadn't stopped him from rushing to help her lift a heavy box of ornaments that Lady Fangfoss had insisted they use to decorate one of the parlors, or fetching a shawl for her when she happened to mention she was a bit cold during one of the outdoor activities, or picking up one of the cut roses she'd dropped while gathering flowers in the garden and returning it to her as though it were a gift. The way she'd smiled at him as she sniffed that rose had been enough to infiltrate his dreams and cause him more than one restless night. She'd flirted right back with him as though he were any other titled toff who had come to the house party

to snag a wife.

And why shouldn't she? Frank stood a little straighter, staring at the crumpled telegram in the rubbish bin. He'd worked hard to earn the money he'd lost. He'd researched the railroad and sought out advice from men who were wiser than him. He'd learned about the financial markets and a variety of investment opportunities. He was not the sort of man to let one defeat bring him down. He was a man who had improved his fortunes once before, and he could do it again. Miss Melanie Pennypacker had every right to flirt with him, in spite of being an American heiress with a line of men chasing after her that extended all the way to Brighton and back.

"Who would you say of all the male party guests has the most money?" Frank asked Mrs. Seymour, his energy returning.

Mrs. Seymour stopped her chopping and glanced up and to the side, thinking. "Not Mr. Prince, that's for certain. Dorset, maybe."

"What about Viscount Wilton?" Nancy asked, her cheeks a rosy pink as she glanced to Frank. "Or Mr. Howard?" She blushed even deeper.

Mrs. Seymour made a sound and shook her head. "Definitely not Mr. Howard." She made a face, then burst into a smile. "Do you know who it is?" she asked, then answered herself with, "Rothbury. I hear that the Marquess of Rothbury has a far larger fortune than anyone suspects, and that he got it through keen investments."

Frank's heart leapt to his throat for a moment. "Investments," he said, grinning from ear to ear. "Perfect. Thank you, Mrs. Seymour."

As he turned to dash out of the room, he heard Mrs. Seymour call, "You're welcome, young man. Always in a hurry."

Frank *was* in a hurry. He was in a hurry to prove himself. He was in a hurry to change his position in life and to find a way to bring himself up to the level of his half-cousins. He was in a hurry to pay them back for the kindness they'd shown him over the years. If Lord Rothbury could help him, that was so much the better.

It took some searching, particularly since he was forced to slink about the house without the butler or any of the young ladies who might be offended by his presence spotting him, but he eventually caught Lord Rothbury in the library, seated near the fireplace, reading. The fact that the man was alone was a surprise blessing, and one Frank was determined to take advantage of.

He stepped into the room and cleared his throat, his pulse beating like a drum in his ears. Rothbury noticed him and closed his book with a look of mild surprise.

"Could I help you, sir?" Rothbury asked.

Frank took that as all the introduction he needed and stepped boldly into the room. "Yes, my lord, I was rather hoping you could

help me." It was outlandishly bold of him to approach a marquess the way he was. Under other circumstances, it could have been enough for him to be sacked. He knew that Avery would never sack him, though. Their friendship wasn't that of lord and valet, it was that of cousins. Closer to brothers, even, since Avery had none. Avery would probably give him an earful if he knew he'd spoken to a marquess without a proper sort of introduction, though.

Rothbury seemed interested, in spite of the gross impropriety, and stood, setting his book aside. "How can I be of service?" he asked. His mouth twitched at the corner, as if over the irony of a marquess asking to serve a valet.

Frank took another, cautious step into the room. "My lord, I will be blunt as I've no wish to waste your time. I have been attempting to better my station in life through investing. I have discovered quite a few schemes that would both increase my fortune and benefit the lives of many. However, my most recent investment, a railroad in Australia, recently failed." He winced at his use of the word "failed".

"I'm sorry to hear it," Rothbury said with a concerned frown.

"So was I, my lord." Frank attempted to win the man over with affability. He took another step closer to him. "The thing is, my lord, I know of several other investment opportunities that could make a fortune for an enterprising young man."

"Good for you," Rothbury said, somewhat hesitantly.

"But as I've just lost everything in the railroad scheme, I need a co-investor to loan me the capital so that I can proceed," Frank went on.

Rothbury drew in a breath and nodded in understanding. "And you wish for me to provide you with the capital you need."

"Yes, my lord." A sense of relief pulsed through Frank at the man's understanding.

That relief was short-lived. "I admire your determination," he began, his look entirely too reticent for Frank's liking, "but you've come to me with no particulars at all. What is the nature of these investment opportunities? How do I know you are a sophisticated investor and not an amateur whose reach is greater than his grasp? How do I know I will not lose money by investing in you?"

"I—" Frank fumbled, heating with embarrassment. What was he thinking, approaching Rothbury without anything even closely resembling a solid plan? "I can assure you, my lord, that I am determined and energetic when it comes to making investments and planning my future."

"I'm certain you are," Rothbury said. "And if you were to provide me with a clearer idea of any sort of plan you have in mind, I would certainly consider it. But you've come to me with nothing more than vague notions of financial glory. Can you provide me with more than

that?"

"I could," Frank said slowly, mortified at himself for being such an impulsive ninny. He swore it was the last time he would act without thinking. "With time."

"Good." Rothbury nodded. "Then return to me when your idea is more fully formed."

"Thank you, my lord."

Frank nodded and bowed, backing up a few steps, nodding again, then fleeing from the room, cursing himself under his breath as he went. He was clever, but not as clever as he thought he was, apparently. As soon as he was far enough from the library to be confident Rothbury wouldn't come after him and see him, he leaned against the wall and growled at himself. If he was going to work out a way to bounce back from the disaster of the railroad, he would need to think things through a bit more and not go charging off, accosting marquesses as though he had a right to. But at least Rothbury had seemed somewhat interested in his potential plans. Which meant Frank wasn't down for the count yet.

He pushed away from the wall and charged down the hall, heading for the nearest staircase that could take him up to a certain secluded spot on the roof that he'd discovered shortly after arriving at Fangfoss Manor. He needed to think and to plan. He needed to come up with a fool-proof scheme that would convert the potential he knew he had into the reality of who he knew he was meant to be.

MELANIE PENNYPACKER WAS FED UP. She read through the letter she'd received from her father in London in the post that morning a second time and growled at it as she walked down the hall from the hyacinth room, where she'd been enjoying morning tea with her particular friends. She would much rather have been laughing with Clementine and Raina and the others than reading her father's boorish and alarming words.

"*Dearest Melanie*," he'd written. "*No, I will not advance you the fortune you've asked for. That money is for your dowery. I will not give it to you now so that you can squander it on some silly scheme to become a shopgirl.*"

Melanie growled again as she reached the foot of the stairs and started up. She was due to spend the afternoon with her Aunt Rosalyn, her chaperone at the house party, but Aunt Rosalyn would only agree with her father's stubbornness. Her idea was not some silly scheme to become a shopgirl. Her idea was to open a department store in London, of the sort that were suddenly becoming all the rage, like Harrods or Harvey Nichols. Her godfather, John Wanamaker, had done it in Philadelphia, where she was born and raised, and Uncle

John had taught her everything he knew. Surely, her father could see that if anyone was primed and ready to open a store that could compete with the likes of Harrods, it was her.

Her father's letter went on. "*I did not send you to finishing school in this godforsaken country to become a bluestocking, or whatever young harridans with more arrogance than sense are called these days. And I did not let you remain with Rosalyn after your commencement so that you would wile away your time on foolish schemes. I sent you here to marry a noble so that I can lay claim to having a grandson with a title. If I had known that you had wasted all these years living on this side of the Atlantic making business plans instead of family plans, I would have forced Rosalyn to put you on the next ship home. You are in England for one purpose and for one purpose only: to marry. Get on with it, already. Your fortune is for your husband. Find yourself one and he can have the money that you seem to think you are owed*."

The letter was signed with love from her father, but Melanie grunted in disgust over her father's suggestion that he loved her when really, he was just making her life miserable.

"My fortune is for my husband," she repeated his words with a huff. "How bitterly unfair. Aren't there laws against those things in England now?"

She couldn't remember precisely, but she was certain Parliament had passed a law a few years ago, while she and her friends were still in attendance at Twittingham Academy, that said a woman's money was her own and that it did not automatically become the property of her husband when she married. She hadn't paid much attention to the law when it had been made all those years ago—she'd been more interested in giggling with her friends and reading inappropriate books and getting into trouble without Miss Julia noticing—but now she wished she had paid attention.

Either way, it was too late now. She continued up the stairs, past the hall where her room was located, and on to the top floor of the house, where the servants had their rooms. At the end of the hall was a small door that led out onto the roof of Fangfoss Manor. There was a small terrace at the side of the house with a spectacular view. She had discovered it to be the perfect place to hide from Aunt Rosalyn and the machinations of her old teacher and the host of the party, Miss Julia, or rather, Lady Fangfoss. On a clear day, she'd been able to see all the way to the North Sea. Judging by the empty bottles and cigarette stubs she'd found on that small terrace the very first time she'd gone exploring in the house and discovered the place, it was a favorite haunt of people who didn't want to be found while they contemplated their fate.

Melanie was certainly one of those. She let herself out onto the

terrace and flopped into one of the old, battered chairs that had been left outside for anyone who wished to enjoy the solitude, and tossed her letter from her father onto the small table between her chair and an unused one. Even though she was alone and in no way visible to anyone attending the house party, she glanced around furtively, biting her lip guiltily, then reached into the pocket of her skirt and took out the enameled cigarette case she'd purchased for herself with the profits of her first, small investment. The case held her last few cigarettes—she would have to figure out a way to purchase more without being found out—and a small tube of matches. She took out a cigarette, placed the case on the table, lit a match, and took her first few, glorious puffs of smoke before shaking out the match and dropping it to grind it with the heel of her shoe. Once that was done, she tipped her head back, took in another breath of smoke, and tried to figure out how she could secure her money from her father without marrying one of the dull nobles attending the house party and giving up her dream of a department store forever.

"Smoking cigarettes is a filthy habit," a genial male voice sounded from behind her.

Melanie yelped and snapped her eyes open. She nearly fell off her chair as she twisted to find Frank Crymble grinning at her from the doorway. Her heart skipped more than a few beats, not only for being caught, but because Frank Crymble was by far the handsomest and most intriguing man at the entire house party. He was fit and lean with a stunningly handsome face, bright, green eyes, thick ginger hair that begged her to run her fingers through it, and a mouth that brought to mind all of the wicked illustrations in naughty books that she and her friends had marveled over while up long past their bedtime at Twittingham Academy.

"It is," she said, not certain whether she was agreeing with him or starting a sentence that she didn't know how to finish. She stared at her tempting cigarette, glanced to Frank, then grinned defiantly and took another drag. "Are you going to do anything about it?" she asked, arching one eyebrow.

"Why yes, I am," Frank said, fixing her with a look that was downright ravenous.

He stepped closer to her, and a shiver passed through Melanie's whole body, settling itself in a particularly tender part of her anatomy that she should absolutely not be thinking about when a handsome valet had her trapped on the roof. That ache grew even worse when Frank extended his hand to her and flickered one eyebrow with a wicked glint in his eyes.

Chapter 2

Frank gestured with his fingers, then said, “Give us a drag,” then winked.

The tension unwound from Melanie’s chest, and she handed him her cigarette with a sly look. “Did you not just say it is a filthy habit?” She gestured for him to take the empty seat next to her.

Frank sighed, took the cigarette, and sank into the chair. He took a long drag, held it for a moment, then let it out and handed the cigarette back to her. “It is absolutely a filthy habit,” he admitted, coughing a bit, “but one I happen to need after the fool I just made of myself.”

“Oh, dear,” Melanie said, pretending to find the whole thing amusing when part of her heart genuinely felt for Frank. Now that he was seated next to her, staring forlornly out over the Yorkshire countryside, she could see full well that he was distressed. She wasn’t going to have that. She liked Frank Crymble. She wasn’t supposed to—she was supposed to see him as beneath her, since he was only a valet and clearly a bastard O’Shea. But all she saw when she looked at him was a devilishly handsome man who had been kind to her since her arrival at Fangfoss Manor. “What have you done?” she asked, then leaned back in her chair and took another puff, as if she were the shopgirl her father seemed to think she was determined to be instead of a dollar princess. Although, frankly, she preferred the term ‘buccaneer’, as it had a much more piratical connotation.

Frank glanced sidelong at her with a sheepish look. “I shouldn’t be conversing so freely with a lady so high above my rank,” he said, smiling weakly all the same.

“I’m not a lady,” Melanie said. She shrugged. “Well, not like my friends, Lady Angeline or Lady Clementine or Lady Raina. And I’m American, which more or less rates me as less than anyone British.”

Frank laughed at her self-deprecating—yet eerily accurate—representation. “Believe me, you don’t rank lower than the Irish in the eyes of Englishmen.”

“I never did understand that,” Melanie said, taking a final puff of her cigarette, then carefully putting it out without destroying the

thing. She'd barely smoked half of it, and since she was almost out, she might need the rest of it later. "What did the Irish ever do to deserve such prejudice from the English?"

"We dared to exist," Frank said with a look of mock solemnity.

Melanie couldn't help but laugh. She shouldn't. The subject and the situation were far too serious, but there was something about Frank Crymble that put her at ease where all of the titled ladies and gentlemen that had made up her world for the past few years didn't. Or perhaps it was as simple as the fact that he was a charming, devilishly handsome man who had been flirting with her since she arrived.

"Go on, then," she said with a nod, putting her half-smoked cigarette back into her pretty case, then setting the case aside on the table. "Tell me what you did that has you looking so mortified and I'll tell you how my father just humiliated me by post all the way from London, mere days after setting foot in this country."

Frank's brow shot up in surprise. "I thought your father was in Philadelphia." It was Melanie's turn to be surprised, but before she could say anything, Frank admitted, "I asked around about you. And all that anyone has been able to talk about below-stairs since the party began is who all the guests are and what everyone's story is."

Melanie hummed in understanding. Of course the servants would gossip about the flood of wealthy and titled guests. "My father has just come over on business," she said. "I haven't seen him since I arrived in England more than five years ago. I don't think he trusts my Aunt Rosalyn, his sister, who married an Englishman twenty years ago, to finish the job of marrying me off anymore."

"You haven't seen your father for over five years, and as soon as he sets foot on British soil, you flee to Yorkshire?" Frank asked with a sly look.

"Papa insisted I attend this house party on Aunt Rosalyn's recommendation," Melanie defended herself, slouching in her chair in the most unladylike manner possible and putting her feet up on the iron rail at the edge of the small terrace. "He's insisting I find myself a titled husband posthaste. But you're avoiding my question, Mr. Crymble. What did you do that has put a grimace like that on your face?"

Frank's grimace was long gone, and the smile he wore grew at her cheeky question. "Since we appear to be indulging in scandalous amounts of informality, call me Frank," he said. He, too, slipped down on his chair so that he could put his feet up on the railing. The two of them must have looked like sloppy and disobedient children just aching to get into trouble with their parents. "And what has put this grimace on my face is the fact that I've just lost all my money." His

smile dissolved into a morose scowl as he stared off at the horizon.

Melanie's heart squeezed for him. "I'm so sorry," she said, straightening and sitting more like the lady that she wasn't. "What happened?"

Frank sent her a surprised look. "You're very kind to ask that first instead of something along the lines of 'How much money could a valet have?' or 'How could you be so stupid as to do that?'"

"I could ask one of those questions instead, if you'd like," Melanie said with a grin. She liked Frank more and more every time she was lucky enough to get to speak with him, and so far, this was the longest conversation she'd had with him.

Frank huffed a humorless laugh and shook his head. "You don't have to worry about those questions. I'll answer everything together. I have been determined to make a better life for myself since I was born, I saved for years, I studied the financial markets and several investment opportunities, I risked it all on a scheme to build a railroad across Australia, and I just received word that the company I invested in lost the contract and went bankrupt."

"I am sorry about that," Melanie said, even though her heart raced with excitement. There was more to Frank Crymble than met the eye.

Of course, she'd been certain there was from the moment he first rushed to help her with that heavy box shortly after she arrived. He'd always had the air of an intelligent man about him, even though he was a valet. And if she were honest with herself, Melanie felt more akin to Frank than she did to three-quarters of the aristocrats she'd been socializing with since arriving in England.

"Is that why you're hiding up here instead of tending to whatever it is valets attend to downstairs?" she asked.

Frank laughed sheepishly and shook his head. "No, I'm hiding up here because I have just embarrassed myself, and Lord Rothbury too, by leaping before I looked and begging the marquess for money."

Melanie's eyes went wide, and her body tensed in sympathetic embarrassment for him. "Good Lord. What did you do?"

Frank looked humiliated, but still managed to smile for her, as he said, "I reacted badly to the telegram saying my investments were gone."

"As one would." Melanie nodded in sympathy.

"And I charged on with a full head of steam, determined not to be beaten down by this set-back, and approached Lord Rothbury in the library to ask him to invest in me so that I could invest in another of the schemes I researched alongside the Australian railroad," he finished.

Melanie sat straighter still and turned to him in interest. "What other schemes?"

Frank glanced askance at her and admitted, “I hadn’t thought that far ahead when I interrupted his reading in the library. I simply barged in and asked for money.”

“Oh, dear.” Melanie’s face heated with shame on his behalf. “I don’t suppose that went over well.”

Frank shrugged, shifting to face her more fully. “It could have been worse. He didn’t demand that I be removed from the premises immediately and decapitated for my audacity. He asked me to return to him when I have the slightest idea what I’m talking about.”

Melanie winced. “Not exactly the best way to start a business partnership.”

“No,” Frank agreed with a smirk.

“At least he didn’t dismiss you out of hand,” she went on. “I’ve been turned down by more people than I can count, my own father included, when I’ve approached them about my idea to build a department store in London.”

Frank’s eyes went wide. “You have plans to build a department store in London?”

“Don’t look so shocked,” Melanie laughed. She pretended to be at ease and that the two of them were simply having a light-hearted conversation about failed business ventures, but something deep within her buzzed and whispered with embryonic ideas she had yet to grasp hold of. “It is not as outlandish as you might think. I have far more experience with commercial enterprises than most women do. Most men too.”

“Do tell.” Frank shifted in his chair so that he faced her fully.

“My godfather is John Wanamaker,” she said. “He has built one of the largest department stores in Philadelphia. I watched him do it, starting when I was a girl. He thought it was quaint that I showed such an interest, so he shared everything with me. We’ve been corresponding since I moved to England. He calls me his path to inside information when it comes to the movements of stores like Harrods and men like John Lewis, who are poised to expand their businesses.”

“So you do know more about stores than simply shopping in them,” Frank said, clearly impressed.

“I do,” Melanie confirmed with a broad smile. “The trouble is, even though the entrepreneurs who are engaged in these endeavors will invite me to supper and share information about the workings of their businesses, they see it as a lark, see me as a harmless ninny who doesn’t truly know what she is talking about. Not one of them takes me seriously enough to invest in me or enter into a partnership. And now my father is in England, insisting I revert to my ostensible reasons for relocating here and marry.”

“Couldn’t you kill two birds with one stone and marry one of these

entrepreneurs who is on the verge of creating a department store empire?" Frank asked with a shrug of one shoulder, as though it were the most obvious thing in the world.

Melanie arched one eyebrow. "Do you happen to know of any? Because I've looked. They're all old and married."

"How damnably inconsiderate of them," Frank said, relaxing against his chair and looping one arm over the laddered back. "Where is a handsome, single man in possession of a good fortune who is also in want of a wife when you need one?"

"Where indeed?" Melanie laughed.

The flutter that started with that laugh didn't end when her laughter stopped, though. Perhaps there was an answer to that question. Perhaps it was right in front of her. Frank Crymble might have been a penniless bastard from a middling family in the Irish aristocracy, but she'd been taken to him from the start. He was clearly a man of intelligence. He had that aura about him. And he was devilishly handsome. Alluring too. He'd turned her head and had her thinking wicked thoughts that a well-bred young lady most certainly should not be having about an illegitimate valet from the first moment she'd seen him. Aunt Rosalyn would never approve, of course, but neither could Aunt Rosalyn stop her from marrying if she had a mind to. Perhaps it wasn't all for naught.

"Frank," she said in a slow, cunning voice, "how would you feel about investing in a London department store?" She tilted her head down slightly and glanced alluringly up at him through her thick, dark lashes.

Frank grinned as though she'd lifted her skirts to show him her ankles and he was about to ask for more. "I think I would like it immensely," he said with a wolfish grin.

They were flirting, and it was every bit as forbidden and delicious as a long drag on a cigarette. The difference was that Melanie was convinced the flirting could lead to something more.

"Would you like to be my business partner?" she asked boldly.

Frank's brow lifted in surprise. "I would, but you forget, I've just lost my money. I have nothing to offer you."

"Oh, but you are the offering," she said, leaning her elbow on the table between them and resting her chin in her palm. "You see, my father has refused to let me have any of the money that I am entitled to…unless I marry." She wiggled her eyebrows at him.

"How fortunate that you are at a house party where—" Frank stopped dead, his mouth hanging open, as he grasped the point of what Melanie was suggesting. He worked his jaw without any words coming out for a moment before saying, "Are you suggesting that *we* marry?" His voice cracked endearingly in the middle of the question.

“That is precisely what I am suggesting,” she said. “It is the perfect solution to both of our problems. If I marry, my father will hand over the money I am due to my husband. Which will mean that you have money for your investments. But you won’t need to worry about choosing a new investment, because I already have the entire scheme for my department store worked out. I have ledgers and research and reams of written proposals that you could peruse to show that I am serious and that I do know what I’m doing.”

Frank gazed at her, amazed, but shook his head and said, “Won’t your father want you to marry a nobleman? Didn’t you say he wanted a grandson with a title that he could brag about?”

“Forgive me for being gauche, but aren’t you a member of an aristocratic family?” she asked.

“An illegitimate member,” Frank admitted, his face coloring a little. “I’m not certain that’s what your father had in mind.”

Melanie made a dismissive sound and waved her head. “Papa doesn’t know what he has in mind. And isn’t everyone simply mad over Miss Almina Wombwell right now, knowing full well she is the illegitimate daughter of Alfred de Rothschild? Legitimacy isn’t what it used to be.”

“Rothschild is richer than God,” Frank said with an uncertain look. “The O’Shea family has a reputation, even in Ireland.”

“Papa doesn’t know that. I’m certain that we could make a strong case for our union,” Melanie said. “Particularly if it were to be a profitable one. Papa might dream of a noble grandchild, but he is American at heart. Not to mention the fact that he made his own fortune as well.”

“Did he?” Frank seemed deeply interested.

“Oh, yes.” Melanie grinned and sat straighter. “He wasn’t born in poverty or anything like that, but neither was he a member of Philadelphia’s elite. I daresay if anyone would understand the appeal of marrying an ambitious man with connections to an aristocratic family, it would be Papa.”

“And you’re not opposed to it?” Frank asked with sudden suspicion in his look. “That is to say, you could have your pick of the houseguests Lord and Lady Fangfoss have invited. You could be a countess or a marchioness, or even a duchess, if the Duke of Cashingham were to choose you.”

Melanie brushed the idea away with a wave of her hand. “All of them would require me to give up my commercial dreams to be little more than a wife. I suspect you might offer me the closest thing to the life I have always imagined for myself.”

“I…I don’t know what to say.” Frank grinned as though he’d been handed a large block of chocolate and he didn’t quite know how to

begin devouring it.

"Say yes." Melanie shrugged. "It's the very best word, after all."

Frank laughed. "You present a tempting offer, Miss Pennypacker."

"Call me Melanie," Melanie said. "Or call me sweetheart, since that is most certainly what we should be to each other." She sent him another flirtatious look.

The whole scheme was as mad as could be, but it was just the sort of mad Melanie had loved the most since setting foot in England. She never would have dreamed that an opportunity to have her way would actually come along, but there it was, in the delicious package of Frank Crymble.

"I would have to—"

Before Frank could finish, little Ewan came dashing through the door, heading straight for the table.

"Ewan, what are you doing here?" Melanie asked.

With little more than a giggle, Ewan grabbed her cigarette case from the table and dashed back into the hall.

"Ewan! You little scamp. Give that back." Melanie leapt up and started around the edge of her chair. Her skirt caught on her boot as she went, and she tilted precariously to one side, toward the railing that protected anyone sitting on the terrace from a four-story drop.

As Melanie yelped, Frank jumped out of his chair and caught her, planting her back on her feet. For a moment, he held her close. The scent of his shaving soap and sunbaked skin was intoxicating, and Melanie couldn't help but stare at his expressive mouth for a moment. There would be other, tantalizing benefits to a marriage of convenience with Frank Crymble that went far beyond the business realm.

"Are you alright?" Frank asked, taking a half step back.

"Yes, I think." Melanie's breath was unsteady. A moment later, she blinked and frowned at the doorway. "Except that Ewan has my cigarette case, and that is not something a little boy should be playing with."

"No," Frank agreed.

They rushed through the doorway and dashed down the hall in pursuit of Ewan. The boy couldn't have gone far. The corridor held nothing but servants' rooms, and they were all closed up while their occupants were at work. Beyond that, Melanie heard the sound of tiny footsteps hurrying down the stairs, so she followed.

"Ewan!" she called out as they descended. "You must give that back at once or I'll tell your mama."

"Who is the boy's mama?" Frank asked as they rounded the corner of the landing and stepped out onto one of the hallways that contained guest bedchambers.

Before Melanie could answer—not that it was her place to answer that particular question—she nearly ran headlong into Miss Julia—whom she should be used to calling Lady Fangfoss by now—and her aunt.

"Oh! Miss Pennypacker, there you are," Lady Fangfoss said with a wide, surprised smile for Melanie. She didn't seem to see Frank at all.

"Melanie, you must stop running off like this," Aunt Rosalyn scolded her, equally as blind to Frank's presence.

"I have been meaning to have a word with you, my dear," Lady Fangfoss went on.

Melanie glanced anxiously at Frank—who held back, but kept a keen eye on her—then to Lady Fangfoss and her aunt. "Could we have a word some other time?" she asked.

"No, this is important." Lady Fangfoss swept up to her and looped her arm through Melanie's escorting her down the next flight of stairs. Aunt Rosalyn flanked her other side, effectively trapping her. "My dear, you need to spend more time engaging with the gentlemen I have invited to this party," she said patting Melanie's hand as though she were a child.

"As I have been telling you all along," Aunt Rosalyn agreed imperiously.

"I have taken such great care to invite quite a few eligible gentlemen. Surely one of them is the perfect man for you. Lord Wilton, perhaps?" Lady Fangfoss suggested.

"Yes, he's the one." Aunt Rosalyn nodded.

"Oh, no, Aunt Rosalyn, Miss Julia," Melanie began, glancing over her shoulder to see if Frank was following them. He was, but at a distance.

"It's Lady Fangfoss now, dear," Lady Fangfoss said. "And I insist that you have at least one conversation with every gentleman at the house party at least once a day."

"Particularly Wilton," Aunt Rosalyn said.

"I will make certain that you have the opportunity, and I will seat you next to the grandest prizes at supper tonight. How does that sound?" Lady Fangfoss finished.

"It, er, sounds lovely?" Melanie winced. Behind them, Frank looked as though he was having a devil of a time keeping a straight face.

"Good," Lady Fangfoss said when they reached the main hall. "I believe Lord Fangfoss has a small gathering of gentlemen in the music room as we speak."

"You will join them at once," Aunt Rosalyn said.

"I will…oh." Melanie let out a sigh. Her aunt and her former teacher weren't going to relent. "I would be happy to."

“Capital,” Lady Fangfoss said with a smile. “Off you go, then.” She gave Melanie a small push in her back.

“I can escort you, Miss Pennypacker,” Frank said, stepping forward and taking a letter out of his jacket pocket. “I have a letter to deliver to Lord Carnlough.”

“What a good and loyal servant,” Lady Fangfoss said, clapping her hands together.

When Frank reached Melanie’s side, the treacly smile Melanie had worn for Lady Fangfoss and Aunt Rosalyn vanished. “You haven’t answered my question,” she whispered to Frank.

“It’s a large question to answer,” he said. “And I should like to see your business proposal before I do.”

Melanie snorted a laugh. It was the most unromantic thing a man could have said in response to her accusation that he hadn’t agreed or declined to marry her. “There isn’t time now,” she said. “I haven’t time to fetch it.”

“And I will be busy with my valet duties for the rest of the day,” Frank said. They slowed their steps as they reached the music room. “Would you agree to meet me in the green parlor later tonight to discuss the matter?”

“I would indeed,” Melanie said with a wide grin. Suddenly, the entire scheme felt like a great deal of fun. And if she were lucky, she would end up with a business empire and an alluring husband for her troubles.

Chapter 3

Frank's head was spinning by the time he found himself in Avery's room, helping his employer and cousin undress for the night, and Avery noticed.

"Has something happened?" Avery asked, glancing over his shoulder as Frank removed his jacket and brushed it.

"Why would you think something has happened?" Frank replied, being deliberately vague to buy himself time to think. He still wasn't certain how he felt about Melanie's marriage scheme or giving up his own dreams of making something of himself independently to aid her with her dreams.

"Come on, man." Avery turned to give him a flat look as Frank hung his jacket, then took too long brushing imaginary lint from it. "We've known each other our whole lives. I know when you are out of sorts."

Frank sighed and walked back to his cousin. He avoided eye-contact with Avery by removing the man's cufflinks as he held each arm up in turn.

"Frank." Avery spoke his name in a scolding tone as Frank carried the cufflinks over to the bureau and stored them in Avery's travel jewelry case.

"All right," Frank sighed, turning back to him and extending his arms as though Avery had caught him in some sort of a lie. "You've found me out. Do you remember that Australian railroad I sank all of my money into?"

"The one I advised you against because Australia is too far away for you to keep a keen eye on your investment?" Avery asked in return, one eyebrow arched.

"It went bankrupt." Frank leaned back against the bureau with a shrug. "It's all gone. My investment has been obliterated."

"I am sorry, Frank," Avery said with genuine sympathy. He sat on the edge of his bed to remove his shoes himself. Some earls might have required their valet to kneel at their feet to remove their shoes for them, but Avery barely tolerated Frank's help with cufflinks, let alone shoes. "What are you going to do next?" Avery asked, then

quickly added, “You know you are welcome to work for me, for the family, for as long as you need to.”

“And you know that I cannot live off of the charity of a family that is unable to fully recognize me indefinitely,” Frank said, crossing his arms.

Avery sent him another flat look. “You do realize that your connection to the O’Sheas is a secret to no one, do you not?”

Frank broke into a wry grin at that comment. “Because of my red hair and green eyes, or because I have the O’Shea penchant for getting into trouble and causing a scandal?”

Avery sat straight, tossing his shoes aside. “You aren’t about to cause a scandal, are you?”

Frank’s grin widened as he thought about Melanie’s proposal. “It is entirely possible that I might end up causing an even bigger scandal than Mama did.”

Avery looked downright alarmed. “Worse than Aunt Nora? You know she currently wins the prize for the single greatest scandal caused by a member of the O’Shea family for conceiving you with that married marquess.”

“If only that marquess had been honest with her about being married in the first place instead of promising her the world and being unable to deliver,” Frank said with a wry grin. “Then I’d outrank you instead of mending your trousers and seeing to your correspondence.”

“That marquess delivered something to Aunt Nora, all right, because here you are,” Avery teased him, getting up to finish undressing. As soon as he had his shirt off, he turned to Frank in sudden alarm. “Please tell me you haven’t gotten some poor woman in the family way. That *would* be a bigger scandal than Aunt Nora.”

“Keep your knickers on. I haven’t done anything of the sort,” Frank laughed. When Avery started to remove his trousers, Frank stopped laughing and averted his face teasingly and said, “No, seriously, keep your knickers on.”

Avery laughed as he took his shirt and trousers to the chair beside the wardrobe and retrieved his nightshirt. “Thank God there isn’t going to be another little O’Shea running about.”

“It would be a Crymble in any case, thanks to my foster father,” Frank said, following Avery and taking up the shirt and trousers to put them away properly. Avery could have been a coal miner and he still would have needed someone to tidy up after him. “And do you know, depending on the outcome of things, there very well could be a few little Crymbles running around before long.”

Avery straightened after slipping into his nightshirt. “Now you have me worried. What is going on?”

Frank let out a breath, figuring he owed Avery an explanation.

“Miss Melanie Pennypacker has proposed marriage to me,” he said.

Avery gaped at him. “The American heiress? She proposed marriage to *you*?”

“Don’t sound so startled,” Frank laughed. “There’s nothing wrong with me.”

“Other than the fact that you’re an Irish bastard who just lost all of his money?” Avery stared at him.

Coming from any other man, those words would have been a grievous insult, but from Avery they were a sign of the informality of the two of them being the best of friends.

“Melanie is American. I suppose things like titles and birth don’t mean as much to them,” Frank argued.

“They matter, whether a woman is American or not,” Avery insisted. “Money matters. And why would a dollar princess propose marriage to a valet that she barely knows?”

“Ah.” Frank held up a hand as though they’d gotten to the point. “Because she is entrepreneurially-minded. She wants to open a department store in London, but she cannot do it without the help of a man. Particularly since her father will not release her dowry to anyone but her husband.”

“Oh, I see,” Avery said with a slow nod. “She didn’t propose marriage, she proposed a merger.”

Frank laughed. “If you want to see it that way.”

“What matters is how you see it,” Avery said. “Are you going to take her up on the offer? That is to say, I would be sad to see you go, but this merger could put us in the same social circles.”

Frank’s smile brightened. “That’s something I hadn’t considered.” He laughed again. “Aw, cuz, how delightfully sentimental of you.”

“Fuck off,” Avery growled, punching Frank’s arm before walking away to his bed.

Frank continued to laugh as he rubbed his arm. “Honestly, I’m not certain what I’ll do. I’m tempted—”

“Who wouldn’t be by Miss Melanie Pennypacker,” Avery said as he threw back the bedcovers.

Frank didn’t finish his sentence. Instead, he asked, “Did you have your sights set on Melanie?”

“Me?” Avery seemed almost offended as he slipped into bed. “God, no. I came to this house party as a favor to Angeline. I have no intention of fastening on the leg shackles with any woman for years to come.”

“So you would give your blessing if I did say yes to this mad scheme?” Frank asked.

Avery shrugged as he settled against the pillows. “If it’s what you truly wanted, yes.”

“I don’t know what I want,” Frank sighed and started toward the door. “I said I’d meet Melanie tonight to talk about it though.”

“Then let me know how the whole thing went in the morning,” Avery said, then added, “Now sod off so I can rest and be refreshed enough to avoid Lady Fangfoss throwing women at my head tomorrow.”

Frank laughed and made a rude gesture to his cousin as he left the room and made his way downstairs. He truly didn’t know what he would decide about Melanie’s offer. So many parts of it were tempting —the allure of wealth, the excitement of attempting to compete with the likes of Harrods, Melanie’s exceptional beauty and the fact that Frank could hardly be around her without his cock taking notice of her finer qualities. But his plan had always been to be a self-made man, not the beneficiary of someone else’s dreams.

Melanie was waiting for him in the green parlor, where they’d planned to meet, by the time he made it downstairs. Frank wasn’t certain what he’d expected, but it certainly wasn’t for Melanie to march forward to greet him with a carefully bound proposal as thick as his thumb.

“There you go, Mr. Crymble,” she said. “There is my proposal for a department store that will cater to the finest clientele London has to offer. I had a devil of a time slipping away from Aunt Rosalyn this evening, so I insist you appreciate my efforts to the fullest.”

Frank’s brow shot up as he took the tome and flipped it open. He blinked in surprise at not only the lengthy written proposal she’s penned, but at the charts and graphs for projected costs and profits, not only to open the store, but for decades to come. “You really have thought this through,” he said.

“As I mentioned this afternoon, my godfather started one of the most successful department stores in Philadelphia, and I learned at his knee,” she said. “I am well aware of the costs and the challenges we might face finding and purchasing an appropriate location and hiring builders and the like, but I am confident we will be able to meet and conquer all those challenges.”

Frank paged through the proposal for a few more seconds before closing it and staring hard at Melanie. “You’ve thought things through so well that I’m not certain you actually need me.”

Melanie’s face pinched. “That is precisely the problem, though,” she said. “I *do* need you. I need you because it is nearly impossible for a woman to enter a business endeavor like this entirely on her own.”

“Are you certain?” Frank asked. “Because this proves that you have the head for business and the determination to see it through, regardless of your sex.” He held up the proposal.

Melanie shook her head. “Unfortunately, that is not the way of the

world. And women have tried this before. Why, when Anne Harvey inherited her husband's store upon his death, she ended up going into business with James Nichols in order to carry on and grow it into the store we have today."

"Harvey Nichols," Frank said with a nod. He'd never set foot inside the premises, but he knew it was a favorite with the high and mighty in London. "So what are you proposing then? 'Pennypacker Crymble'?"

Melanie laughed. "Heavens no. What an awkward name. I suppose it would have to be 'Crymbles' if we were to marry, which we would have to in order to secure financing."

Frank caught his breath at the possibility of having a successful store named after him.

A moment later, he blew that breath out and handed the proposal back to Melanie.

"I trust your business acumen," he said slowly, "I'm just not certain where I fit into the picture, except as a tool by which you will be able to convince your father to give you the money you need."

"Oh," Melanie said, a hint of shock and regret pinching her face. She set the proposal on a small table nearby and went on. "Oh, no, Frank, it's not like that. I didn't mean to give you the impression that I would only want to marry you for mercenary reasons. I'm so sorry if I —"

She was cut off by the sound of a male voice in the hall. Frank knew it at once as belonging to Mr. Howard. The very last thing he wanted was for that pretentious boob to find him and Melanie alone together when they shouldn't have been. Not only would it stain Melanie's reputation, but Frank wouldn't put it past the oaf to use the excuse of being caught alone with Melanie long after most of the party had gone to bed as a way to trap her into marriage with him.

"Hurry," he whispered, making a quick sweep of the room with his eyes as Howard's voice grew nearer. The man was speaking to a woman, though that woman didn't sound particularly happy.

"In here," Melanie said, grabbing Frank's arm and yanking him toward a small door in the corner of the room.

Whatever hope Frank had that the door led to another room through which they could escape was dashed. It led into a closet that was so tiny he and Melanie could barely squeeze into it together. They only just had time to shut the door before Howard and his companion entered the room.

"Here, you see?" Howard said with an amorous tone that made Frank grimace. "We are perfectly alone in here. Now give us a kiss, love."

"I don't know what you must think of me, but I am not that kind of

girl, Mr. Howard." Frank recognized the woman's voice as Nancy, the kitchen maid.

A flash of indignation shot through him. How dare Howard importune a girl as sweet as Nancy in such a way?

A moment later, he had his doubts about Nancy's sweetness when she went on to say, "The bracelet you gave me the other night is a pretty thing, but if you want me to do *that*, I'll need something more."

"I have this pretty silk scarf," Howard said temptingly. "Will that earn me a kiss at least?"

There was a brief pause before Nancy said in a biddable voice, "Go on, then."

The quiet that followed was filled with sounds of sighing and smacking and giggles and other things that left no doubt at all what Nancy thought of the scarf Howard had offered.

"I would have held out for another bauble," Melanie whispered in the pitch-black of the closet.

Frank couldn't see her, but he could most certainly feel her. Their bodies were pressed together intimately, and the closet was heating up fast. He was suddenly aware of how wonderful Melanie smelled, even at that late hour, and how perfectly her curves fit against him. There weren't many places for his arms and hands to settle in the cramped closet, and with just a bit of movement, he slipped them around her waist and drew her even closer. She was only a few inches shorter than him, and even though he couldn't see, he could feel her tip her head up and bring her soft mouth very close to his.

"That's more like it, my dear," Howard growled breathlessly. "Just like that."

Frank's imagination exploded with everything Howard and Nancy could possibly be doing just yards away on the other side of the door. And he had quite an imagination. His breath caught in his lungs, his heart hammered against his ribs, and his cock strained against his trousers as his thoughts ran wild. Worst—or perhaps best—of all, he was certain Melanie was highly aware of his body's reactions. She seemed more than a little breathless and restless herself.

"Whatever is going on out there?" she whispered, barely audible.

"I have a few ideas," Frank murmured back.

When Melanie giggled in response as Nancy sighed loudly with pleasure, Frank couldn't help himself. He tilted his head down, finding and capturing Melanie's lips, and kissing her with all of the desire that he'd built up since the moment he first saw her.

Chapter 4

Not much surprised Melanie after the unconventional life she'd made for herself as an American heiress in England, but she was utterly bowled over by the power and possessiveness of Frank's kiss. His mouth was demanding yet gentle against hers, molding their lips together. He didn't hesitate for a moment as he brushed the seam of her lips with his tongue, then invaded her when she opened to him. He knew just how to taste her to leave her wanting more without making her anxious that his tongue would be too much or making her feel uncomfortable. In short, he was the most talented and alluring kisser she'd ever experienced.

It was all she could do not to moan with pleasure—as the maid was doing in the room with Mr. Howard, of all people—as Frank slipped his arms more firmly around her. He might have been a valet, but she could feel something come over him as their bodies pressed against each other. He had a command to him that she found irresistible, especially when he slid one hand down to her hip, then caressed her backside. It was a bold move, but one that had her feeling as though she might melt into liquid heat.

As their kiss went on and on, lips and tongues caressing, teeth nipping, and hands roving each other's bodies in the dark, Melanie's heart thumped harder, and everything within her screamed that she should give herself over to Frank completely. Wild thoughts filled her head—that the closet was small enough for Frank to wedge her against one wall, hike up her skirts, and take her right there in the dark. Deeper still than that was the thought that she would gladly marry Frank simply to have him in her life, and in her bed, whether he could be a means to the money her father had set aside for her or not.

She was moments away from doing something rash and fumbling for the fastenings of his trousers when the maid suddenly yelped and there was a smacking sound.

"Cheeky!" the maid called out. "I'll need more than a pretty scarf for that, thank you very much."

"But Nancy," Mr. Howard groaned, "look at the state I'm in."

“A nice pair of earbobs should be enough for me to take care of that,” Nancy said, her voice retreating just a bit.

“A little diddle tonight and I’ll have them for you first thing in the morning,” Mr. Howard said, his voice retreating from the room as well.

“I’ve heard that one before.” Nancy’s voice faded as she walked back into the hall. “It never leads to any good. Promises mean nothing if….” Her voice faded out of earshot entirely.

Melanie was still wrapped in Frank’s embrace, and if she were honest with herself, she had no interest at all in changing that. They’d paused their kissing to listen to Mr. Howard and Nancy’s conversation, but once they were gone, Melanie lifted to her toes again and sought out Frank’s mouth.

This time, when he kissed her, he groaned with delight. She did as well. Their sounds of enjoyment seemed to encourage both of them, and within seconds, they were panting and sighing as they devoured each other’s mouth and let their hands roam free. Melanie nearly shouted in victory when Frank caressed one of her breasts through her blouse and corset, brushing his thumb over her nipple. The jolt of pleasure he caused went straight to her core.

It was a different story when she slid her hand between them to caress his erection through his trousers. For a moment, Frank let out a sigh of incredible pleasure, pressing into her hand, but then he pulled back sharply.

“I’m too close already,” he gasped, pulling away from her as much as he could. “You are far too tempting for my safety.”

He reached for the door, letting a blast of light and cooler air into the closet.

“You see?” she said breathlessly as they stumbled out of the closet. “We work very well together in more ways than one. If we were married, there would be no issues of safety or propriety here.” Her heart danced for joy at the idea, and she sent Frank a wicked grin.

Frank laughed, then stalked toward her, backing her all the way to the room’s small sofa so that she leaned against its back. He planted his feet on either side of her, trapping her in the most delicious position. His large, capable hands traveled from her hips up her sides to caress her breasts as fully as he could with the layers of clothing between them.

“I don’t think we would be entirely safe like this, in a parlor after the house has gone to bed, even if we were married,” he said, bringing his already kiss-swollen mouth close to hers. His green eyes danced with arousal and mischief. “We could get away with just about anything in the confines of our own bedchamber, though.”

She started to giggle at the lascivious suggestion, but was cut off as

he slanted his mouth over hers for another kiss. Again, it was magical and consuming. She moaned and pressed her body into his, throwing her arms over his shoulders. He was powerful and masculine, and in spite of every one of her instincts to be strong and stand on her own, she wanted to give herself over to him for his pleasure. And even though a rational part of her mind told her it was simply lust, that she was a woman and he was a virile man, and that love and romance had nothing to do with the need that consumed her, her heart pounded all the same.

"Say you'll marry me," she gasped between kisses. "It would be the perfect partnership in every way. We could conquer the world together."

Frank made a sound of lust and longing deep in his throat, then pulled back. Melanie could feel the reluctance in his body. Perhaps it was mere animal instinct for him as well, but the hunger in his eyes as he studied her was intoxicating.

"Will you allow me to consider my options?" he asked, his voice hoarse from kissing her. "Not because I question whether you are using me for your own ends. I do not."

"And I am not," Melanie insisted. Perhaps she had thought that way when she first conceived of the idea, but not after his kisses.

"I only wish to be certain that this is absolutely the right decision for both of us," he went on. "There would be consequences, of course."

"Of course," she echoed, knowing the reality of their proposed match.

"And I must decide whether I can forgo my ambition to make something of myself on my own in order to become someone's partner," Frank finished.

Melanie laughed suddenly, and when Frank glanced strangely at her, she said, "Usually that is a concern that a woman has. We are the ones who are normally asked to forgo our individual selves to become someone's partner."

Frank smiled. "What an interesting pair we make, then."

He moved into her, his gaze dropping to her lips, and he leaned into her again. The clatter of something being dropped in the hall forced the two of them apart, though.

"I guess we're not as alone as we thought we were," Melanie whispered as Frank stepped to the side, releasing her from where he had her trapped against the sofa.

"We aren't," Frank said with a sigh. He glanced to the doorway, then back to her with a hungry look. "I would say that I wish we were, but something tells me that would only get us into more trouble."

The sound of a maid cursing echoed from the hallway, and Frank took a larger step away from her.

"I'll go see if I can draw whoever that is away," Frank said in a whisper, "so that you can steal back up to your room."

"Thank you," Melanie whispered, tip-toeing to the doorway, already plotting how she would slip upstairs without being seen. "And you will tell me when you have an answer to my proposal?" she asked. She blinked as soon as she said the word and twisted to search the room for her business proposal. The blasted thing was sitting on a small table nearer to the window, in plain sight. It was a relief that Mr. Howard hadn't seen it, although the man had been busy at the time. She dashed to retrieve it, then made her way back to Frank.

"I will most definitely think about it," Frank said, "and I will give you an answer as soon as I can."

He kissed her one more time, fleetingly, then cleared his throat, tugged at the hem of his jacket, then stepped out into the hall. A few moments later, Melanie heard him say, "Let me help you with that, Grace. It's too late for you to still be working anyhow."

"Thank you, Mr. Crymble," the maid said. "You're such a gentleman."

For a fleeting moment, Melanie felt a twist of jealousy. She laughed it away as she waited for her opportunity to hurry back to her room, though. Frank had brought up a few legitimate concerns about her wild proposal, but after the way he'd kissed her, she was confident that he'd see things her way and say yes.

FRANK FULLY INTENDED to make a decision about Melanie's offer sooner rather than later, but in the days that followed, one thing after another got in his way. On the one hand, as soon as Avery got wind of the fact that Rothbury was interested in Angeline, every spare moment of Frank's days were spent following his orders to keep an eye on the pair so that things didn't get out of hand between them. Frank attempted to convince Avery that Rothbury was a good match for Angeline, but Avery had developed some sort of a grudge against the man based on a rumor.

On the other hand, spying for Avery meant that Frank was upstairs with the houseguests more often. That inevitably led to Lady Fangfoss believing she could order him about the same as her footmen, particularly when it came to assisting with the activities and entertainments she had planned for her guests.

"The stage needs to look more like a Roman forum," Lady Fangfoss complained on the afternoon of the Roman play that was being staged in the garden. "Right now, it looks more like a scaffold at a village faire."

“I’m certain it will look more authentic once the actors are in place and wearing their costumes, my lady,” he told Lady Fangfoss with as much of a smile as he could manage.

“I suppose you’re right,” Lady Fangfoss sighed. “The entire purpose is to bring young couples together, after all.”

“And a wonderful job of that you’ve done so far, Lady Fangfoss,” Frank told her, figuring there was no harm in flattering the woman.

“Oh, thank you,” she said, pressing a hand to her chest. “I was beginning to think no one had noticed my efforts. We’ve only had the one engagement so far, and I was so hoping for more. I am determined to convince Mr. Howard to set his sights on Miss Pennypacker, but she hasn’t shown a lick of interest in any of the gentlemen I’ve picked out for her so far.”

A blast of jealousy gripped Frank, and as he finished moving a chair that was doubling as a set piece, he straightened and turned to Lady Fangfoss. “I wouldn’t be so quick to pair off Miss Pennypacker with Mr. Howard if I were you, my lady,” he said with as much deference as he could manage while feeling as though something that was his was being attacked.

It was just his luck that Howard walked by the front of the stage as he spoke. The man must have stepped out from the backstage area when he heard his name mentioned, and at Frank’s statement, he balked. “What business is it of yours if the chit takes a fancy to me or not?” Howard demanded.

“Oh! Mr. Howard.” Lady Fangfoss rushed from the center of the stage to the stairs, descending to hurry over to Howard’s side. “It is none of the boy’s business, none at all.”

Frank’s back snapped straight at the woman’s words. He was nearly thirty and hadn’t been called a boy for more than a decade. But other than stepping closer to the side of the stage, there wasn’t a damn thing he could do to contradict her.

“I should say it is none of his business,” Howard sniffed, putting his nose in the air. “And if you ask me, the servants in this house have been getting high above themselves.”

“Begging your pardon, sir,” Frank said, clasping his hands behind his back to prevent himself from reaching out and strangling the man, “I am not a servant in this house, although I do consider some of them friends now. Nancy, the kitchen maid, for example.” He made no effort to hide the look he pierced Howard with, trusting that Lady Fangfoss’s lack of understanding on such matters would prevent her from being shocked.

Howard understood exactly what Frank meant. “How dare you, sir? You have no right to accuse your betters in such a way.”

“Accuse?” Lady Fangfoss blinked rapidly and glanced between the

two men.

Howard's face turned an unflattering shade of puce. "My lady, I request that this upstart be removed from my presence at once."

Lady Fangfoss pursed her lips and frowned at Frank. "Mr. Crymble, you have offended one of my guests. Please leave this instant."

Frank's brow shot up. "Begging your pardon, my lady, but I have done nothing other than point out to Mr. Howard that I am not under your employ."

Lady Fangfoss glanced between him and Howard, clearly flustered. "Yes, well, you are someone's servant, Mr. Crymble. And Mr. Howard is an important man. And furthermore, I asked you to leave, and I am a countess."

Frank clenched his jaw to keep from saying something that would land him in deeper trouble. "I am very sorry to have offended you, my lady," he forced himself to say, then bowed curtly. "I will leave at once."

"Thank you, Mr. Crymble," Lady Fangfoss said as Frank walked off the stage and started back toward the house through the garden.

"Why are you thanking him, my lady?" Howard complained. "He's just a servant, a nobody."

"I was being polite," Lady Fangfoss replied.

Frank didn't stay to hear the rest of their conversation. He balled his hands into fists as he headed past the hedge maze and on toward the house. It would always be that way with the upper classes, no matter how far he advanced on his own. Class and birth meant too much in England. Even the wealthiest industrialists of the past century had been forced to contend with the disdain of the aristocracy. Frank huffed a humorless laugh and swatted the corner of the hedge maze as he walked. He wondered what the likes of Howard would think if they knew he was the grandson of an earl and the son of a marquess by heritage, even if he was a bastard by birth.

His angry thoughts nearly made him careen headlong into Melanie as she stepped around the corner of the hedge maze with what looked like a pile of costumes in her arms.

"Oh!" she said, reeling back to avoid him. Her expression shifted from surprise to delight to concern within a heartbeat. "Good heavens, Frank. You look as though you are auditioning for the role of thundercloud. Has something happened?"

"Not really," Frank said, agitated. "It all depends on whether you consider being called 'boy' by a silly countess and told off by a blackguard who interferes with the housemaids for fun as something happening."

Melanie looked mutinous. "What sort of nonsense is that? You were insulted."

“I shouldn’t let them vex me that way,” he said, pushing a hand through his hair and forcing his shoulders to drop. Somehow, now that he was face to face with Melanie, the insults he’d just received didn’t carry the sting that they had. “It’s just that there is only so much a man can bear before it leaves its marks.”

“My poor Frank.” Melanie dropped her pile of costumes without a second thought, then stepped forward to clasp her hands on the sides of his face. “I’m sorry you had to endure that.” She lifted to her toes so that she could give him a quick kiss.

In an instant, Frank’s mind was made up. Perhaps it was the insults, or maybe it was the sweet sincerity in Melanie’s eyes or the taste of her lips at the exact moment when he needed them. Or perhaps it was the sure and certain knowledge that, as her husband, no one would dare to insult him or hold him back from achieving his dreams. Whatever it was, he knew what he wanted as clear as day.

“Yes,” he said once she’d settled back on her feet again.

“Yes?” she asked with a grin and one eyebrow arched.

He slipped his hands around her waist, not caring who saw them. “Yes, Miss Melanie Pennypacker, I will accept your proposal of marriage. I will be your husband of convenience.”

Melanie burst into a wide smile and started to giggle, but stopped herself. She frowned. “Are you certain you are not saying that because your feelings were hurt just now?”

In answer to her question, Frank pulled her closer and wrapped his arms around her. He slanted his mouth over hers and kissed her with all the passion he felt and then some. She felt as though she belonged in his arms, and he didn’t ever want to let her go.

“Never mind,” she sighed once he let her go. They were in full view of anyone who might have walked through the garden. “That is all the answer I need.”

“I should hope so,” Frank said with a wink. He felt a thousand times better already, as if he could ignore the slights of the likes of Howard and beat them at their own game.

“Melanie! Hurry up and bring us those costumes,” Angeline shouted from farther down the garden, close to the stage area. “Hello, Frank,” she called to him, waving.

“You’d better go,” Frank told Melanie, his future bride. It felt good to think it. “We’ll sort out the details after this ridiculous play is over.”

“It is ridiculous,” Melanie said, beaming as though she danced in the clouds. She walked on, then turned to him and said, “But then, this entire house party has been ridiculous, so I shouldn’t be surprised.”

“And there is more ridiculousness to come,” Frank told her with a wink. Because he had a feeling that, once they announced their

intentions, the whole world would feel as though it had been turned upside down.

Chapter 5

Melanie felt like a new woman for the next week and a bit as she and Frank secretly plotted their union. They wanted to be absolutely certain that the business details were completely worked out, that they were suited for each other, and that they weren't making an overly-impulsive decision based on frustration. That meant Melanie was forced to give Aunt Rosalyn and Lady Fangfoss the slip on more than one occasion when she was meant to be spending her time with the male houseguests. Or rather, it meant she had the pleasure of finding ways to give them the slip. Everything about her and Frank's impending nuptials was a lark, as far as Melanie was concerned.

Which was why she was brimming with excitement the afternoon that she brought her friends together to tell let them in on her plans.

"I have an announcement to make," she said, standing in front of the mass of her friends, as Charity served tea and Angeline sliced the Victoria sponge that had been sent up on the tea tray into smaller pieces.

"An announcement?" Olive asked, lowering the book she'd brought with her to the meeting. "I love a good announcement."

"I would like to announce that tea is served," Charity said with mock solemnity before handing Olive a teacup.

The six of them giggled, as did little Ewan, who was nestled snug on Raina's lap, munching on a biscuit that he'd swiped from the tray almost as soon as the maid brought it into the room. Melanie was in such a fluttery, happy mood that she winked at the boy instead of taking him to task for stealing her cigarette case, which she had yet to get back. None of her friends knew that she smoked, so asking Raina to search Ewan's things to retrieve it for her would be more of a confession than she was ready to give.

Although compared to what she was about to tell her friends, confessing that she'd taken up smoking was nothing.

"Get on with it, then," Raina said. "Ye ken I cannae stand suspense like this."

"No, you never could," Melanie agreed with a laugh.

“Whatever it is, it has certainly put you in a jolly mood,” Charity said. Of course, she was in a jolly mood herself these days, thanks to her engagement to Wilton.

Melanie clapped her hands together and held them over her heart. “My friends, I would like to announce to you that, like Clementine, Angeline, Olive, and Charity, I too am now engaged.”

Her friends all gaped at her. Olive—who had taken a large sip of tea—spit it violently back into her cup. “Engaged?” she sputtered.

“To whom?” Clementine asked, utterly baffled, and perhaps a bit put out that she hadn’t been the one to make the match for Melanie.

“That is the best part,” Melanie said with a broad smile, practically bouncing on her toes with excitement. “I’ve proposed to Frank Crymble, and he has accepted my proposal.”

The parlor went dead silent. Her friends all looked at her as though she’d produced a dead mouse from the folds of her skirts.

“I’m sorry,” Angeline said, blinking her eyes rapidly and shaking her head. “Did you say *Frank*?”

“*You* proposed to *him*?” Charity asked, horrified.

“Yes, yes, it’s all very unusual, I know,” Melanie said, waving away their concerns. “But as you’ve all known for ages now, I am very unusual as well.”

“Unusual, yes,” Raina said. “I didnae think ye were bloody barmy.”

Melanie dropped her hands to her sides and let out a frustrated breath. “I thought you all, of all people, would be pleased by this announcement. I’ve found a lovely, supportive man who is perfectly accepting of my scheme to build a department store in London, and who is quite attractive and intelligent to boot.”

Her friends exchanged looks, as if none of them wanted to be the first one to come right out and say she was mad.

“Frank is the very best of men,” Angeline said slowly. “I’ve known him all my life.”

“Donae let a pretty face fool you,” Raina said, shaking her head. “Believe me, I ken what succumbing to the allure of a handsome man can bring about. Ye have to be *absolutely certain* no’ just of yer own heart, but his heart as well.”

Melanie was stung and stood with her back straight in offense. “Are you saying that I don’t know what I want? Or that Frank will turn out to be an utter rotter, and I’ll realize I made a mistake?”

“That is nae what I’m saying at all.” Raina sighed, set Ewan aside, then stood, moving to Melanie and holding her forearms. “All I am saying is that everything changes when ye give yerself to a man like that. Be he true or false with ye. Ye have to be ready for it.” She turned to smile at her son. “I was lucky to get something greater out of the fiasco created when I decided I’d rather face life without a

husband. Motherhood is the grandest thing that has ever happened to me. It's like giving away a part of yer heart to someone else, someone ye love far more than ye ever thought possible." She glanced back to Melanie. "It wasnae easy, facing Society's sneers all alone, but Ewan was worth it. My *freedom* was worth it."

"But if I did marry Frank and the natural result of marriage were to occur, if we had a child or two or more, I would not be ostracized from society for it," Melanie insisted.

"You would be ostracized for marrying a valet and a bastard," Clementine said, trying to sound kind, as she stood and joined Raina. "Crossing class lines is absolutely frowned upon."

"Is it truly crossing class lines, though?" Melanie asked, more upset by her friends' lack of support by the moment. "I am constantly being reminded that I am one of those American 'buccaneers' invading English soil and stealing away the titled gentlemen. Frank is the son of noble parents, whether he can announce those lineages or not. If you ask me, we are ideally suited."

"Perhaps," Charity said slowly, wincing a bit. "But that does not mean you will be accepted in society if you go through with this."

"What if I don't give a fig about being accepted in society?" Melanie asked, tilting her chin up. "It was never my ambition to marry into the aristocracy and live by their silly rules, it was my father's ambition. I simply used his plans for me as a tool to position myself favorably to achieve *my* dreams. I have never cared about which balls I am invited to or what form of address I am supposed to use for a viscount or a duke. Why does the aristocracy give themselves such airs anyhow? They are no better than anyone else. Everyone, high or low, came into this world bloody, naked, and screaming. The rest of it, all the 'my lords' and 'your graces' and the like is frippery that does nothing to determine a man's character. Frank is intelligent and handsome and ambitious. That is all that matters to me."

Melanie felt rather proud of herself for her speech, but her friends looked more than a little embarrassed for her.

"Spoken like an American," Clementine sighed.

There was a moment of awkward silence. Melanie's heart sank. "I'm going to go through with it," she said at last, though without as much confidence as she would have liked. "I am going to marry Frank, both because I need him to advance my business plans and because I like him."

Her friends exchanged uncomfortable looks.

"Well, if you like him," Olive said, finishing her sentence with a shrug. "Men and women have married for lesser reasons."

"And Frank *is* a good man," Angeline insisted, biting her lip.

It was the best Melanie would get from her friends, even though it

was far less than she'd hoped for. She left their tea as soon as she was able to after that and went in search of Frank.

"Things did not go as I had hope," she confessed to him when she found him out on the rooftop terrace, where they'd first hatched their plan. "They all seem to think I'm mad."

"Well, the plan is a bit mad." Frank tried to cheer her up with a smile, sliding an arm around her shoulders as they stood side-by-side, looking out over the Yorkshire countryside.

Melanie laughed weakly and leaned her head against his shoulder. He was quite good at being a comfort when she needed one. It was yet another asset that he would bring to their merger.

"I think we should charge forward, blast through everyone's expectations, and announce our engagement at tonight's Friday dance," Melanie said after a long, companionable moment of silence. She straightened and looked at Frank. "And who knows? We might find some acceptance for our madness from some of the more sympathetic guests."

"You never know," Frank agreed with a shrug.

But at heart, Melanie did know. She knew from the moment Frank stepped into the ballroom that night, dressed in his nicest suit—which wasn't up to the level of even the humblest of the houseguests—how it would turn out.

"What is that cheeky valet of Lord Carnlough's doing at the ball?" Aunt Rosalyn hissed as she spotted Frank.

Melanie's heart caught in her throat at the sight of him. Even though he wasn't dressed as finely as any of the other men in the room, he was still the handsomest of the lot, as far as she was concerned. "I asked him to come, Aunt Rosalyn," she whispered, then stepped away from her aunt.

"You asked him?" Aunt Rosalyn caught her hand and pulled her back with a suspicious look. "Melanie, what sort of scheme are you hatching?"

"Oh, Miss Pennypacker, I have been hoping to speak with you all evening," Lady Fangfoss said, hurrying across the ballroom with a young gentleman of decidedly average features in tow. "Have you met our neighbor, Mr. Hazelton yet? He has come for the dance, and I thought—"

"Thank you, Lady Fangfoss," Melanie cut her off, knowing precisely what she thought, "but I am already spoken for."

"You are?" Lady Fangfoss blinked in surprise.

Frank had spotted her and started across the room with a rakish smile. The guests stared curiously at him, parting as though he were a plague-carrier. Lady Fangfoss made a distressed sound as he approached, but before she could say anything, Melanie stepped away

from her and met Frank, holding out her hand to him. He took it and kissed her knuckles, sending her a rogue's wink as he did.

Melanie wasted no time getting straight to the point. "Ladies and gentlemen," she called out. Even though the ballroom was crowded and the small orchestra Lady Fangfoss had hired to play every week was in the middle of a waltz, so many people had already had their heads turned by Frank's unusual arrival that it didn't take long for quiet to reign. "Ladies and gentlemen," Melanie repeated, resting her hand in the crook of Frank's elbow, "I have an announcement to make." She glanced to Olive—who stood with her fiancé, Mr. Prince—and winked.

"Melanie," Aunt Rosalyn said in a warning voice, hurrying to her side. "What is the meaning of this?"

"I should like to announce my engagement to Mr. Frank Crymble," Melanie answered her aunt in a loud voice, telling the entire room. "He is the perfect man for me, and the two of us will be very happy together."

Dead silence followed. Even the orchestra stopped playing. Everyone in the room stared at Melanie and Frank in shock. Someone dropped their fan, and the sound of it clattering to the floor was like cannon fire. It was worse than the reaction of her friends, worse than she'd expected.

"Is this some kind of joke?" Lord Fangfoss huffed, wedging his way around some of the stunned guests to glare at Frank.

"It is no joke, my lord," Frank told the man with a deferential nod. "I adore Miss Pennypacker. We have become friends during this house party, and the natural next step is for the two of us to marry."

"Are you out of your mind?" Lord Fangfoss bellowed. He twisted this way and that in indignation until he spotted Lord Carnlough. "My lord, what kind of tomfoolery is this? I demand you sack your valet at once."

"Begging your pardon, Lord Fangfoss," Lord Carnlough said, stepping forward with a scowl, "but who I employ and whether or not I sack them is none of your business. I might just wring his neck, though," he added in a murmur, staring hard at Frank.

"This man is obviously a fortune-hunting blackguard," Lord Fangfoss insisted, throwing his arm out at Frank.

"I agree," Aunt Rosalyn said, marching forward as if she would wrestle Melanie away and toss her in a jail cell for the rest of her days. "You cannot marry a *valet*," she told Melanie, dripping with derision.

"I can marry whomever I like," Melanie said defiantly. "And I just so happen to like Mr. Crymble."

A murmur of horrified disapproval passed through the room. It was accompanied by shaking heads and wide-eyed stares. Melanie's hopes

that the scandal she and Frank would cause would be seen as romantic and fanciful were failing fast.

"I can assure you that there is nothing untoward or underhanded about this match," Frank spoke up for them both, standing taller and glaring at Lord Fangfoss.

"Nothing untoward?" Lord Fangfoss bellowed, his whiskers quivering with disbelief. "Everything about a valet laying claim to an American heiress is untoward. How dare you insult your betters in this manner?"

"How dare you claim to be better than a good and industrious man when you have done nothing more than inherit everything you have?" Melanie fired back at him.

"Oh, dear," Lady Fangfoss said in a faint voice behind Melanie. "I fear I am going to be sick."

That declaration set off a flurry of activity. Lord Fangfoss rushed to his wife's side, as did one of the other chaperones. Together, the two of them escorted Lady Fangfoss from the room, fanning her furiously as they did. The other guests burst into whispers and gossip, staring in shock at Melanie and Frank as they did. Melanie's friends were scattered throughout the room, but Clementine and Angeline were close enough to hurry to Melanie and Frank's side, Dorset and Rothbury coming with them.

"Oh, Frank. I'm not certain you should have done this," Angeline fretted as soon as their small group headed for the hallway.

"Forgive me, my lady," Frank addressed Angeline formally, "but haven't you always supported my efforts to make something of myself?"

"I'm certain she did not mean for that to happen by you marrying *inappropriately*," Rothbury said with a frown.

"But it would have been suitable for me to lift myself up to the point where you would have felt you could invest in me, my lord?" Frank asked.

Melanie rested a hand on his arm, sensing that he was too close to losing his temper for his own good. "Perhaps we all need a bit of fresh air," she suggested.

"Yes, that might be wise," Dorset said, studying Frank as though he wasn't certain what to make of the man.

They moved down the hallway toward a door that led out to the garden, but before they could take more than a few steps, Aunt Rosalyn burst into the hallway.

"You, my dear, are a disgrace," she huffed at Melanie. "I know you are new to the ways of England—"

"I have lived here for well over five years, Aunt Rosalyn," Melanie interrupted her.

“—but that does not mean you can fly in the face of social convention in such a blatantly scandalous way,” Aunt Rosalyn finished as though Melanie had never spoken a word.

“I want to marry Frank, and I am going to marry him,” Melanie said in no uncertain terms.

Aunt Rosalyn’s back snapped straight, and she glared at Melanie through narrowed eyes. “We’ll just see what your father has to say about this.”

“Papa?” A quiver of anxiety shot through Melanie’s heart. “Oh, no, Aunt Rosalyn, please don’t.”

Without another word, Aunt Rosalyn arched one eyebrow, then turned and marched off.

“That does not bode well,” Clementine said, watching the woman retreat down the hall.

“No, it doesn’t.” Melanie sighed, then bit her lip.

“Might I suggest that the two of you lay low for the next few days until the initial shock of this announcement blows over?” Rothbury suggested.

Melanie could think of a thousand tart replies for the man, but sense got the better of her. She and Frank had already caused enough of a disturbance for one day. “Perhaps that would be wise,” she said with a sigh. She glanced to Frank. “At least we made it through the first gate.”

“The rest will be easy to overcome,” Frank said, smiling at her.

For a moment, she thought he might kiss her. It would have been lovely, since one of the best parts of their marriage scheme so far was Frank’s kisses. That would have been out of the question with so many disapproving people in the hall with them, though. The only thing they could do was bid the others goodnight and retire to their individual rooms for the night. But Melanie had a feeling that, thanks to her aunt, the real battle was yet to come.

Chapter 6

"What in the bloody hell are you thinking, man?" Avery shouted at Frank the next morning as Frank helped him to dress for the day. "Becoming engaged to Miss Pennypacker?" Avery made a sound of frustration and disgust.

"I fail to see why it is acceptable for me to pursue business interests that would lift me above the circumstances of my birth, but it is not acceptable for me to marry a willing woman with ambitions of her own that I can help her with," Frank grumbled as he jabbed cufflinks into Avery's shirt.

Avery pursed his lips and glared at Frank. "She is not the right woman for you," he insisted.

"Really?" Frank glared right back at him. "And who, pray tell, would be the right woman for me? Some farmer's daughter? A biddable dairy maid? The daughter of an impoverished baron who is already on the shelf?"

Avery's glared transformed into a sullen frown. "You are making it sound as though I care more about status and position than I do about my own family."

"No, Avery," Frank insisted, "*you* are making it sound like you care more about social rules than your own flesh and blood. You sound as though you only approve of me making a better life for myself if I do it within the boundaries you and everyone else with a title has set for me."

"That isn't fair." Avery pulled his arm away from Frank once his cufflinks were in place.

"What isn't fair is that my blood is just as blue as yours, but you seem to think I am not good enough to marry a woman that you could have pursued if you'd wanted to."

"I have not been interested in pursuing Miss Pennypacker, or any other woman at this blasted house party," Avery insisted, putting on his jacket by himself.

"Then why do you take such offense to me wanting to marry and build a life with her?" Frank demanded. Now more than ever, he had no interest in maintaining the boundary of master and servant that

was supposed to exist between him and his half-cousin. Avery was his family, like a brother to him, and he'd be damned if he stood on ceremony by being polite when the topic of conversation was so sensitive.

"Because," Avery began, but let his sentence go with a huff. He shoved a hand through his hair, threw out an arm as if he believed the explanation were obvious, then let out a heavy breath and dropped his shoulders. "Are you quite certain that you are not simply pursuing Miss Pennypacker for her fortune?" he asked. "Because that is what it appears to be, and that is what everyone will say."

"And are you more concerned about what people will say than you are about my happiness? Or Melanie's, for that matter? Because she is the one who proposed to me."

"No one will see it that way," Avery insisted.

"I don't care how people see things," Frank growled. "What they see is none of their business, and as soon as Melanie and I have successfully opened the department store Melanie has dreamed of for so long, every one of the naysayers will be singing a different tune."

"And if you fail?" Avery asked with a hard look.

Frank's mouth twitched into a smile in spite of himself. "If we fail, I'll still have a position as your valet. And perhaps Melanie can become Angeline's lady's maid."

Avery blurted out a short laugh, then shook his head as it to ward off any feeling of humor. "Don't joke about this, Frank. You're in far more of a bind than you realize."

"It is a bind that Melanie and I will find our way out of together," Frank said.

Avery growled and rubbed a hand over his face, then shook his head, as if he were struggling with a myriad of emotions on the subject. "I can only help you out so much, you know," he said. "I have a terrible feeling that this whole thing is a disaster waiting to happen."

"Even if it is," Frank insisted, "it is a disaster I will not face alone."

That was the silver lining behind the dark clouds that had closed in around him and Melanie since their announcement the day before. If anything, the resistance the two of them had felt to their plans to marry had brought the two of them closer together. At first, Frank had seen Melanie as a lovely opportunity and an exciting and passionate woman. In the last few days, as they'd begun to see how much opposition the two of them would face, he'd seen how determined she was. After the carnage of the night before, Frank was beginning to think that he had somehow engaged himself to one of the most powerful and beautiful women he'd ever known.

He finished with Avery's morning routine, tidied up his room and

taken a few of his things down to the laundry, then went in search of Melanie. No doubt she was encountering as much trouble as he had been that morning. Even the servants had given him wary looks, as though his attempts to rise above his station would end with them all being sacked without references. He shouldn't have been surprised that everyone below stairs was as horrified by his and Melanie's announcement as those above stairs, maybe even more so. Crossing class lines was anathema.

He found Melanie slipping out of the house and heading into the garden with a book as he walked around the corner of the house from the kitchen entrance. They were still several yards apart, but just seeing her troubled face and her closed-off posture as she left the house sent pangs through his heart. He'd caused that anxious look she wore, and if it was the last thing he ever did, he would wipe it off of her face forever.

She eventually glanced up and spotted him, and her worry melted into a radiant smile that not only lifted Frank's heart, it had his cock perking up as well. He smiled back, marveling at the weightless, delighted sensation that filled his chest and made him want to run to her and solve all of her problems. It was a feeling he hadn't ever experienced before and one that he hadn't expected to feel at all, what with the nature of the agreement the two of them had entered into. It felt a bit too much like that strange creature called love.

The urge to take Melanie away from the house party immediately and live out a happy and industrious life with her put speed in Frank's steps, but before either of them could move more than a few steps, Lady Fangfoss rushed out through the door Melanie had just used to leave the house and dashed after her.

"Miss Pennypacker, I need to speak with you," Lady Fangfoss said, grabbing Melanie's arm. Lady Fangfoss noticed Frank and frowned. "I need to speak with you *immediately*," she said, tugging Melanie in the opposite direction.

Melanie let out a breath and dropped her shoulders. She sent Frank an apologetic smile, but was then led away.

Frank echoed Melanie's sigh of disappointment, shaking his head. They'd known this entire engagement would raise eyebrows, but he'd had no idea it would raise hell as well. He thought about turning back and finding something to do in the house, but opted for a walk, setting off across the garden. In the weeks that he'd been at Fangfoss Manor, he'd discovered a few favorite haunts—the ruins, the moors, the boathouse he'd come across half a mile up the River Derwent. Perhaps what he needed to unknot his back and siphon off some of the frustration he felt was a good, long ramble.

He got no farther than the edge of the rose garden when he crossed

paths with Dorset.

"Ah, Mr. Crymble, I was hoping to encounter you," Dorset said in a measured voice.

"My lord," Frank greeted the man with a curt nod. Dorset hadn't precisely been supportive the night before, but he hadn't cursed Frank's name either. The man deserved politeness.

"About your engagement to Miss Pennypacker," Dorset went on.

Frank fought the urge to cringe and walk away from the man. "What about it?" he asked instead.

Dorset shifted uncomfortably. "Are you certain it is entirely necessary? That is to say, I spoke with Rothbury last night after the… confusion. He seems to think your true concern is finding investors for your business endeavors."

Uncertainty had Frank's heart beating faster. "I am certain Miss Pennypacker and I could use investors for the business plans we have," he said cautiously.

Dorset winced. "That is not what I had in mind. It occurred to me that, perhaps, were you to receive the sort of capital Rothbury seems to believe you are after, you would not feel the need to engage yourself to Miss Pennypacker."

A knot formed in Frank's gut. "Are you offering to pay me not to marry Miss Pennypacker, my lord?"

"Is it something you would consider?" Dorset asked. At least the man had the decency to look sheepish as he did so.

"No, sir, it is not," Frank sighed. "I happen to be quite fond of Miss Pennypacker." More so than he might have thought at first. "Beyond that, she needs me to assist her in achieving her own aims, and I am more than happy to help her."

"I see," Dorset said, looking more uncomfortable by the moment. "So you will not be dissuaded?"

"No, my lord, I will not," Frank said with as much pride as he could muster. "Good day to you."

He bowed, then headed off, not minding where he was going as long as he could get away from Dorset. It just so happened that heading in that direction brought him closer to the house again, so he reconfigured his plans, deciding to see if Melanie was done with Lady Fangfoss so that the two of them might be alone to discuss things. None of what they'd planned was working out even remotely the way they'd thought it would, but Frank was bound and determined to make the whole thing work.

"WHAT ABOUT MR. HAZELTON, THOUGH?" Lady Fangfoss pressed Melanie, her expression twisted with distress. "He's a perfectly fine gentleman."

“Perhaps he is, but he is not the man for me,” Melanie insisted.

“It’s a shame about Wilton,” Lady Fangfoss sighed. “I was so certain he would do for you.”

“No, my lady,” Melanie nearly growled in frustration. Lady Fangfoss had been working her way through every male houseguest since she dragged Melanie aside, and Melanie’s patience was near its end. “I am engaged to Mr. Crymble.”

“But he is not suitable at all,” Lady Fangfoss complained, wringing her hands. “What will people think when they hear that the two of you met at my house party?”

Melanie’s brow shot up. “Is that your concern, my lady? That my attachment to Frank will somehow reflect poorly on you?”

“This is not what I had in mind at all,” Lady Fangfoss fretted. Melanie could tell it was a half-lie. “This is not what I trained and educated you girls for all those years ago.”

“To be honest, my lady, Mr. Crymble is not what I had in mind either,” Melanie said, tilting her chin up. “He is a thousand times better, even if society abhors our match and shuns us forever. Mark my words, Frank and I will have the final laugh on this matter.”

She turned and marched away from Lady Fangfoss, knowing she was being rude, but too aggravated by the situation to do anything else. She’d known all along that one of the hallmarks of society was the mistaken belief that a woman had a right to keep her business to herself, that everyone and then some felt as though they had a right to comment on things, but she hadn’t realized how frustrating it would be.

She was ready to scream with that frustration when she spotted Frank storming across the garden, as if he, too, were frustrated beyond belief. The sheer relief that she felt at the sight of him was a balm to her soul. From the moment they’d first entered into things, Frank had been a pillar of strength and fortitude. In a way, he had more censure to endure than she did, and she admired him beyond telling for weathering the storm that had broken over them. Frank was bold and generous, handsome and clever. He was, in fact, everything she ever could have dreamed of. Perhaps they could find a secluded spot to spend the day together without anyone else’s interference.

She picked up her pace, ready to run to him if she had to, when Angeline’s call of, “Melanie, can I have a word with you?” stopped her in her tracks.

Frank had just noticed her at that moment. He and Melanie shared a fleeting smile of warmth and longing, but the moment was ruined as Melanie let out a growl of frustration, then schooled her face into a smile as she turned to Angeline.

“What can I do for you, dearest?” Melanie asked her, pretending

more happiness at the sight of her sweet friend than she felt.

Angeline swept right up to her and grabbed Melanie's hand. "I am worried for you," she said. That worry was painted clearly on her face. "Everyone thinks that Frank is only marrying you for your money. Even Rafe told me as much last night."

"Last night?" Melanie asked, one eyebrow arched.

Angeline's face went bright pink. "We are not discussing my improprieties at the moment, we are discussing yours."

Melanie huffed in spite of the protectiveness she had always felt for her sweet friend. "No one should be discussing anything having to do with me and Frank at all," she insisted. "The two of us are planning to marry, and those plans will come to fruition."

"Yes, but are you certain it is the right thing for everyone involved?" Angeline asked, then bit her lip for a moment before continuing with, "You and Frank will be the targets of such vicious attacks. Why, the things I have already heard people say about you make me blush. Everyone is inclined to think the worst in this situation."

"What other people think is other people's concern," Melanie insisted.

"But it will catch up with you," Angeline said. "They'll call Frank horrible things, even if you think he is your hero. I know you have grand plans for your department store," she went on, cutting Melanie off before she could protest, "but Frank does not exactly appear as your knight in shining armor, riding to your rescue, in this situation." She paused for a moment, then said, "It would almost be better if he had rescued you in some tangible way. At least daring rescues have a sort of romantic appeal to them that society approves of. Business deals and financial reasons are not romantic."

Melanie sighed, pressing her fingertips to her temples. "My and Frank's reasons for marrying are our reasons and ours alone. I am grateful for your concern," she said when Angeline attempted to go on, "but I would kindly ask you to stay out of this matter and trust that Frank and I know what we are doing."

Frank stood by the edge of the garden watching the entire exchange, so rather than stay with Angeline and take the whole thing around in circles until everyone was exhausted, Melanie hugged Angeline quickly, then dashed off to catch up to Frank.

She was finally able to join up with him without being interrupted.

"If one more person tells me that we're making a terrible mistake, I think I might scream," she said as she grasped his hand and marched off with him—anywhere, she didn't know where for certain.

"I know precisely how you feel," Frank sighed, walking swiftly at her side.

“You don’t happen to know of someplace where we can avoid every other soul on earth, do you?” she asked, laughing without much humor.

Frank’s expression brightened. “In fact, I do.”

He adjusted the way he held her hand so that their fingers twined together, and the two of them set off at a jog along the path that would take them to the river. Within an instant, it was as if the two of them were children running away from their lessons for the day. They escaped the boundaries of the house and its frustrations, and for the first time in days—perhaps the first time in years—Melanie felt free.

The spot Frank had in mind for the two of them to hide was a small boathouse upriver from the center of Fangfoss Manor. Melanie figured the structure still belonged to the estate, but it looked as though it hadn’t been used during the house party.

“I discovered this spot after my first week here,” Frank said, helping Melanie to sit on a blanket that was on hand in the building that he spread near the wide doorway looking out on the river. “It provides a lovely view of the river, and no one would even think to disturb anyone sitting here.”

“Good,” Melanie sighed. “I am disturbed enough already.”

She leaned her head against Frank’s shoulder as he sat beside her. The way the building was constructed, they were able to sit on a ledge with their feet dangling down toward the river, but not quite enough to reach the water. The large space where a boat would have been moored to their right was empty, making the sounds inside of the building echo. The opening where a boat could be rowed in and out of that mooring space was wide enough that the sun shone in.

Frank slipped his arm around Melanie’s back and tugged her close. “Once we make it through society’s initial shock of our unusual pairing, things will be easier,” he said.

“Do you think?” she asked, shifting slightly so that she could loop her arms around his waist and rest her chin playfully on his shoulder.

“I’m certain of it,” he said. “And as soon as the store is built and opened, instead of calling us mad, everyone will applaud us for our wisdom and foresight in creating such a perfect partnership.”

Melanie laughed, gazing fondly at Frank. “I like the sound of that story.”

“People have a hard time accepting what they aren’t used to,” Frank went on, adjusting so that he shifted one leg around her backside, meaning they sat nearly face to face. “But if you’re willing to take a chance on me, we’ll prove to everyone that they’re wrong to deny us.”

“I am willing to take a chance on you, Frank Crymble,” Melanie said, suddenly aware of how intimately they sat together, and aware

of how much she liked it. “I’ve discovered that I actually like you quite a bit.”

“That’s a good thing.” Frank grinned at her in return. “Because I like you quite a bit too.”

She wasn’t certain what force prompted her to do it, other than the obvious animal attraction, but before she could question the impulse, Melanie leaned into Frank and brushed her lips against his. Just as she’d hoped, Frank kissed her back, sliding his arms around her in an intimate embrace. His lips were soft, but the way he kissed her was possessive and delicious, as though he intended to open her up in every way possible. The best part of that was how desperately she wanted it.

“You truly are lovely,” Frank said in an amorous voice, his eyelids heavy as he gazed at her. He brushed his hand across the side of her face, then leaned in for another kiss.

Melanie knew in an instant that she was in a tantalizingly dangerous situation. Her inhibitions fell away like water rushing down the stream, joyful and bubbling. If she even had a voice that urged her to caution, it withered as soon as Frank’s hands slid across her sides to cup her breasts.

“I know one certain way for us to convince people we should marry,” she said in a sultry voice, peeking up into his dazzling, green eyes. “I know something we could do that would end with everyone demanding we wed as soon as possible.” In fact, she had been one of the ones who suggested the same course of action to Angeline just a few weeks before, and it had worked brilliantly for her.

“Are you certain that’s what you want?” Frank asked, pulling back a bit.

Melanie caught her breath, wondering if she’d gone too far, been too bold. “Is it what you want?” she asked.

Frank laughed deep in his throat, creating a sound that had her breasts tingling and her core throbbing. “Love, I’ve wanted you almost from the moment I first saw you.”

“Truly?” Melanie grinned, feeling as though she were filled with butterflies and fireflies. “From the first moment?”

“I’m a man, after all,” Frank said, tipping her back and adjusting her so that she lay on her back on the blankets. “We have needs.”

Excitement like Melanie had never felt before coursed through her, particularly when he bunched her skirts around her thighs so that he could kneel between her knees. “Women have needs as well, you know.”

“No, they don’t,” he said with a teasing look, shifting her skirts even higher. “All of the pamphlets and sermons say they don’t. You’re a bloodless automaton who faints at the sight of chair legs.”

Melanie laughed out loud. “You have been grossly misinformed, sir,” she said.

That was the last thing she said. Frank crawled over her so that he could bend down and kiss her with searing passion. Kissing while upright was lovely, but kissing in a horizontal position was more magical than Melanie had ever dreamed it could be. There was something in the way Frank parted her lips and stroked his tongue across her bottom lip before invading her mouth that had her breathless and wanton. His weight above her was thrilling, and in spite of her insistence on strength and independence, she wanted him to mold her to his will. She even let out a plaintive cry of pleasure as he teased his tongue against hers and cupped the side of her breast through her blouse and corset to show him that she was his.

“And you are absolutely certain about this,” he asked in a husky voice as he unbuttoned the top several buttons of her blouse, pushing it open so that he could rain kisses across her chest and the tops of her breasts.

“More certain than I’ve ever been of anything,” she sighed, wriggling under him so that their bodies fit together perfectly.

That was all the permission Frank seemed to need. He plucked at the top few hooks of her corset until her breasts were free, then treated each one to kisses, licks, and sucking that had Melanie writhing and mewling under him. She’d never imagined it would feel so good to have a man’s mouth closed around her nipple, his tongue teasing it to hardness. And in spite of the expertise of Frank’s touch and the way he made her feel, she knew there could be so much more if they were both naked and tangled up in each other.

In spite of their intent to relax and enjoy each other’s company, there was a feeling of urgency as Frank tugged at her skirts, piling them above her hips so that he could nudge her legs farther apart. He moved back to kissing her mouth as he balanced above her with one hand and slipped his other hand through the split in her drawers. Melanie had certainly touched herself before, but there was something powerful about the pleasure Frank drew from her as he stroked the wetness between her legs. He wasted no time laying claim to her, slipping a finger, then two, inside of her and stroking.

Any last resistance Melanie might have had to whatever Frank wanted melted away at the pleasure he brought her. She felt like putty in his hands as he moved his fingers in and out of her, and she sighed like a harlot in response. That was beautiful enough, but when he shifted his hand so that his fingers remained inside of her as his thumb stroked over her clitoris, she was in heaven. She moved against him, her breath coming in shorter and shorter pants as the pleasure tightened into a coil within her. Better still was the way Frank

watched her, as if waiting for the treat of his life.

The lust and affection in his wicked eyes and the way he pleasured her was too much, and with a moan of pleasure, her body throbbed into orgasm, giving him the treat he'd been waiting for. Frank groaned in victory, drawing her pleasure out as long as he could, then diving down for another, long kiss. As Melanie's body relaxed into a post-orgasmic glow, she could still feel the sharp tension radiating from him.

"Go on," she whispered, opening her legs wider for him.

"If you're certain," he said, his voice tense and shaky.

She nodded, then proved how certain she was by fumbling with the fastenings of his trousers.

That was all the signal Frank needed. She could feel how desperate he was as his prick leapt up the moment it was free. He panted unsteadily, shoving his trousers aside enough to free it all the way, then positioning himself between her legs. For one, startling moment, she felt a pinch of fear, then a quick burn as he breeched her. He felt so big lodged inside of her, stretching her to her limits. With his first, careful movements, it felt as though he were claiming her, and when his passion pushed him to move faster and deeper, it wasn't just as though he were claiming her, it was as if he were melding their souls together.

In no time at all, Melanie was moaning and sighing and spiraling up to the heights of pleasure again. Everything about Frank was wonderful. She closed her legs around his backside, urging him to take her in every way possible. He rose to the challenge, thrusting into her with abandon and making her feel like the most beautiful woman in the world. More than that, her body burst into throbbing pleasure once more, squeezing around him and spurring him to spill himself inside of her with a cry.

It was perfect. Granted, it was wicked and scandalous, and completing things the way they had was wildly risky. But that was the point. The two of them were determined to be together, and nothing at all would stop them now, Melanie was certain of it.

They were exhausted after their mating, and in spite of the indignity of remaining half dressed with important bits hanging out, the two of them fell into a brief nap as soon as the wild pleasure of the moment receded. Even that was wonderful, in spite of the hard surface they lay on and the potential that anyone floating by on the river might see them.

"We should go back," Melanie sighed what felt like an hour later. It could have been more, it could have been less. She didn't care a thing for time anymore. "I'm certain Lady Fangfoss and my Aunt Rosalyn will be wondering where we are."

“Do you think if we told them where and what we’ve been up to they’d speed the wedding along, or would they call in the local police?” Frank asked with a laugh, setting himself to right.

Melanie laughed with him, in spite of the fact that in reality, it wasn’t very funny. She stood and straightened her skirts, then rebuttoned her blouse. “There’s only one way to find out,” she said.

They lingered a bit more, checking each other to make certain there were no outward signs of how badly they’d misbehaved, then they set out from the boathouse hand in hand, heading up to the house.

Melanie couldn’t stop smiling the entire way, which would surely give her away to her friends. Any one of them would know what she and Frank had been up to by their expressions alone, even though their clothes were in perfect order. Half of the other guests would probably know too. Even Aunt Rosalyn would likely be able to guess, although Melanie hoped she wouldn’t.

But it was not Melanie’s friends who met them in the garden when they returned to the house. It wasn’t half of the party guests either. Aunt Rosalyn was there, as were Lord and Lady Fangfoss, but the most prominent glare that met her and Frank when they set foot in the garden again was the furious glare of Melanie’s father.

Chapter 7

Frank noted the resemblance immediately. Mr. Pennypacker had the same jet-black hair and blue eyes as Melanie. He had the same look of determination on his face as well and the same defiant set of his shoulders. It was no surprise to Frank that the man had built himself a business empire in Philadelphia. Everything about him radiated ambition and success.

And every ounce of Mr. Pennypacker's power and determination was immediately focused on Frank with narrow-eyed suspicion.

"Melanie, explain yourself," the man ordered in a booming voice, dragging his eyes away from Frank to frown at his daughter.

Frank was still holding Melanie's hand from their walk. It felt as though he was still holding it from the magical moments they had spent together, tangled up in passion as all the things they felt for each other had blossomed into the impulsive display of communion. He winced inwardly at himself. When had he become such a sentimental fool? He winced even harder at the thought that Mr. Pennypacker would be able to tell that he'd trifled with his daughter less than an hour before.

"Hello, Papa," Melanie greeted her father with surprising calm, ignoring his demands. She let go of Frank's hand and stepped closer to him. "You're looking well. It's been so long since we've seen each other."

At first Frank thought it was ridiculously dangerous for Melanie to ignore her father's demand for answers and to step up to him with a smile—which was, admittedly, strained. Melanie's aunt and Lord and Lady Fangfoss gaped at her as though she were attempting to step into a lion's den with a sausage link.

They were all surprised when Mr. Pennypacker let out an impatient breath and reached for his daughter. "Yes, yes," he said with irritation. "You're looking lovely as well, my dear." He didn't embrace Melanie, but he held her hands and let her kiss his cheek.

Another wave of anxiety hit Frank as he worried about whether Mr. Pennypacker would be able to smell something off about his daughter. Melanie must had been concerned as well, because she took

a large step back.

“What brings you all the way up here, Papa?” she asked. Frank’s heart swelled and he had a hard time not breaking into a grin. Melanie was better at bluffing than anyone he’d ever met.

“You know very well why your father is here,” Aunt Rosalyn huffed, stepping up to stand beside Melanie and her father, making a triangle of their conversation. “He is here because of your wicked plot to marry that man.” She flung out an arm to point at Frank. The gesture was so vehement and so rude that Frank found himself flinching as though he were a bashful schoolboy.

“We did everything that we could to stop her, sir,” Lord Fangfoss told Mr. Pennypacker, gazing at the man with a look of intimidation that Frank would have found comical on any other day.

“Yes, we did,” Lady Fangfoss seconded. “Your darling daughter has always been one of my most headstrong pupils.” She tilted her head to the side. “Although perhaps that honor should go to Lady Raina Prince.” She paused again before saying, “Or perhaps Lady Clementine Hammond.”

“You are missing the point, my dear,” Lord Fangfoss said with a frown for his wife, then an ingratiating look for Mr. Pennypacker. “The point, sir, is that we tried to stop her.”

“But she would not listen,” Aunt Rosalyn said. “The girl never listens. Why, she—”

Mr. Pennypacker held up a hand to stop the woman, to stop them all. Once Aunt Rosalyn reeled back, snapping her mouth shut, the man let out a huff and frowned at Melanie. “What in God’s name possessed you to defy everyone’s expectations and—no, on second thought, I know the answer to that question.” He let out a second huff and shifted to frown at Frank. “You. Come here.”

As much as Frank loathed being ordered about by men who thought too much of themselves, he knew which side his bread was buttered on. He hurried forward, standing at Melanie’s side. He glanced to her to share a look meant to bolster both of their confidence, then squared his shoulders and faced Mr. Pennypacker proudly. That was made easier by the fact that he was two inches taller than the man, but that was the only advantage he had.

“Who, precisely, are you?” Mr. Pennypacker said, narrowing his eyes in scrutiny.

Hope gripped Frank’s gut. Mr. Pennypacker didn’t have the same aura of imperiousness that the vast majority of the aristocrats he’d encountered in his life had. “Frank Crymble,” he told the man, believing that he might just have a chance of winning Melanie’s father over. “I am Frank Crymble, valet to Lord Carnlough.”

To the side, Lady Fangfoss whimpered, as though Frank admitting

he was a valet was akin to him cursing like a sailor.

"But he is so, so much more than that, Papa," Melanie said. She grasped Frank's hand and leaned against his arm to show her endorsement of him. "He is an investor, like you are, for one. He has a keen mind for business, for another. He has grand plans to improve himself."

"Yes, by marrying my daughter," Mr. Pennypacker snorted.

"He is a man of no name," Aunt Rosalyn hissed. When Mr. Pennypacker stared at her in confusion, she went on with, "He had no family," in a pointed voice.

"His name is Frank Crymble," Mr. Pennypacker said, gesturing to Frank. "And I would assume he has a family to go with that name."

"No, brother, you misunderstand." Aunt Rosalyn squeezed her eyes shut and balled her hands into fists before whispering, "He is a bastard."

Frank peeked nervously at Mr. Pennypacker as Melanie squeezed his hand.

Mr. Pennypacker rolled his eyes. "Oh, Lord." He turned to Lord Fangfoss. "Might you have a room where I could speak to my daughter and her bastard in private?"

"It is probably for the best," Lord Fangfoss said, assuming a superior mien. "Right this way. I shall allow you the use of my own study for whatever dressing-down you need to give."

It was Frank's turn to roll his eyes as he, Melanie, and Mr. Pennypacker followed Lord Fangfoss into the house while Aunt Rosalyn and Lady Fangfoss clung to each other, heads together in whispered gossip. At least, if he was able to speak to Mr. Pennypacker without constant interference, he and Melanie might have a chance to make their case to the man and explain why they wished to marry.

As it turned out, that was precisely the information Mr. Pennypacker wanted to know as soon as the three of them were alone in Lord Fangfoss's small study.

"Would you kindly tell me why you are attempting to send me to an early grave with your shenanigans, my dear?" Mr. Pennypacker asked, crossing his arms over his barrel chest and frowning at Melanie and Frank as they stood side by side in front of him.

"I can assure you, Papa, I am not trying to upset or defy you," Melanie insisted. "Frank is a marvelous man, and we have plans to go into business together."

Mr. Pennypacker made a put-upon sound and glanced up to the ceiling, as though appealing to the heavens for patience. "This isn't about your silly department store idea, is it?" he asked.

"It is not a silly idea, it is a brilliant one." Melanie tilted her head up in defiance.

Frank had a hard time suppressing his grin. Melanie was outstanding, unlike any women he'd ever known. No other woman of his acquaintance would ever have stood up to and talked back to her father the way she was. Frank expected Mr. Pennypacker to silence her and put her back in her place at any moment. He would be ready to defend her if the man did, but it was a testament to the sort of man Mr. Pennypacker was that he didn't instantly squelch everything his daughter said.

"Go on," Mr. Pennypacker said with a long-suffering sigh, turning to Frank. "Tell me why you think you are worthy to marry my daughter."

Frank saw the situation for what it was—his one and only chance to make a case for himself that would change his fortunes forever. "I appreciate your concern for your daughter's welfare and happiness, Mr. Pennypacker, and I can assure you that I have those same concerns."

"Do you?" Mr. Pennypacker arched one eyebrow in doubt.

Frank sensed that he needed to get to the point, and fast. "Yes, it is true that I was born out of wedlock. But my mother was one Lady Nora O'Shea, daughter of the then Earl of Carnlough. My father was a marquess, but he was married to another—a fact he failed to mention to my mother while courting her. I was farmed out to be raised by foster parents, Mick and Katherine Crymble, shortly after I was weened, but the O'Shea family kept close contact with me, and when I was old enough, I was given a place with the current Earl of Carnlough, Avery O'Shea, my half-cousin, as his valet."

Mr. Pennypacker shrugged. "I fail to see how this plot from a penny dreadful makes you a suitable husband for my Melanie."

Frank's mouth twitched in irritation at the comparison. There was nothing horrific about his origins, just unfortunate. He knew how to answer, though. "My origins have given me a unique perspective, sir," he explained with a nod. "I have a foot in both worlds. I have aristocratic heritage, but with experience of the common man. I have set myself the goal of making my own way in the world, making my fortune, and with that goal in mind, I have studied business, followed various financial markets, and attempted investments of my own."

"And how have those investments panned out?" Mr. Pennypacker asked with genuine interest.

It was both encouraging that the man was interested and discouraging when Frank had to admit, "I recently had a rather large investment fail, sir."

Mr. Pennypacker grunted. "More investments fail than succeed."

Frank's brow shot up. Perhaps he had a chance to win the man over after all. If he wasn't mistaken, they had common ground

between them. “You are so right, sir. Which is why I am determined to try again. Your daughter has shown me her own entrepreneurial plans, and I find them to be as exquisite as she is.” He turned to Melanie with a smile, reaching for her hand. He figured a little personal flattery in the form of showing how much he liked Melanie couldn’t hurt his chances.

Mr. Pennypacker glanced between the two of them with a suddenly shrewd look. “Do you love him?” he asked Melanie bluntly.

“I…well…we’ve only known each other a short time, and…that is…I find Frank exceptionally charming and intelligent, and I believe in his ambition,” Melanie stumbled through her answer, her face going pink.

Frank fought back a grimace, having no idea whether Melanie had helped or hurt the situation.

Mr. Pennypacker hummed, narrowing his eyes further and studying the two of them. Frank could feel sweat break out on his back, and even though he did his best to stand straight and tall, he couldn’t stop his heart from pounding.

“I’ll tell you what,” Mr. Pennypacker said at last, staring at Frank. “If you were coming to me and asking for a job, I would hire you in an instant. I can tell that you are, in fact, intelligent. You have the gleam of an ambitious man about you, and I happen to think you’re right about having a foot in both worlds.”

“Truly?” Melanie said, her expression brightening.

Her father glanced briefly to her before going on. “But I won’t let you marry my daughter.”

“Papa,” Melanie growled, shoulders dropping.

“By your own admission, you’ve only just met the man,” her father argued. “Marriage is something you shouldn’t enter lightly. Why, look at your Aunt Rosalyn.”

Frank had no idea what the man meant, but Melanie looked chastised. He would have to get that story out of her later.

“No,” her father went on with a sigh, “I cannot give my consent for you to marry a man whom you’ve just met, no matter how much potential I think he has.” He paused, then turned to Frank. “Now, about that job.”

“He isn’t interested, Papa,” Melanie said, grabbing Frank’s hand and tugging him toward the door. “And we *will* marry, because whether you see it or not, yet, Frank is the ideal husband for me. Unlike some people, he respects my dreams and ambitions, and he wishes to help further them.”

“I do,” Frank said with a respectful nod to Mr. Pennypacker.

That was all he was able to get out, however. Melanie was bound and determined to leave the room, and in that moment, he felt as

though his place was by her side. Mostly because she seemed to be in the sort of mood to do something rash. They'd already done something rash and borderline unforgiveable that afternoon, and he was loath to lead Melanie into any more trouble than they might have already caused.

"I cannot believe his stubbornness," Melanie huffed as they reached the stairs and made their way up. Frank assumed they were headed for the rooftop terrace so that they could discuss the situation in private. "Fathers can be so aggravating."

"Mine was aggravating enough to not ever acknowledge me, in spite of my mother's pleas for assistance," Frank said as they rounded the landing and continued up to the servants' floor.

Melanie's furious expression morphed into pity. "I'm sorry, Frank. I'm so caught up in my own frustration that I've forgotten other people have had difficulties in their lives as well."

"We all endure difficulties," Frank said with a shrug, squeezing her hand. "It's how we contend with them that makes us who we are."

"You are so very right," Melanie said with a sigh. That sigh still held traces of frustration, but as they made their way out to the terrace, flopping into the mismatched chairs that were still positioned in the small space, her primary emotion seemed to switch to melancholy. "What are we going to do?" she asked.

"What do you want to do?" Frank shifted to face her, taking both of her hands in his and running his thumbs over her knuckles. "Because even though the rest of my investments have failed, I am still more than willing to invest in you. You are an investment that could never fail."

Melanie's eyes filled with sentimentality. "Oh, Frank, that was lovely."

"I'm serious, Melanie," he said, scooting a little closer to her. "I know your father doesn't approve. No one approves. But none of that matters to me. I would marry you tomorrow, if you wanted me to. And, dare I say it, I do not routinely ravish young ladies in boathouses. Unlike my father, I have no intention of abandoning you in any way after that, no matter what the outcome."

"You really are the sweetest of men," Melanie said, moving from her chair to sit on Frank's lap and throw her arms around his neck. "I will stop at nothing until the two of us are married."

Frank's heart lifted with affection that he wanted to laugh at. He was not the sort of man to go all doe-eyed over a woman, was he? It appeared he was now.

"So what would you like to do?" he asked. "How would you like to go about convincing your father to agree to our marriage? Do you want to tell him what we did this afternoon?"

“Heavens, no, not right now,” Melanie said, a look of horror in her eyes. “Perhaps when the time is right, but my father would have a heart attack if he thought I was anything less than as pure as the driven snow, and we can only use that as a last resort.” She frowned and glanced off into the distance for a moment. “No, what we need is a different sort of argument to convince him we are meant to be.”

“I am open to whatever suggestions you might have,” Frank said.

Melanie’s brow knit even more as she thought. Frank was only slightly worried that she didn’t come up with a grand plan immediately.

At last, her expression lightened, and he could tell she had an idea. “Angeline said something to me earlier,” she began. “She said something about you coming to my rescue, about how that would be romantic enough to sway everyone’s opinion and make them approve of our match.”

“You think I should be your knight in shining armor?” Frank grinned broadly. “I like that idea. Where’s the dragon? I’ll slay him for you right now.”

“No, silly,” Melanie laughed, shoving his shoulder. A moment later, she sucked in a breath, then leapt off of his lap. She hurried to the iron balcony surrounding the terrace and glanced straight down.

Frank was the one who nearly had a heart attack at the sight of her peering down the side of the house. “Come back from there, Melanie. You could fall, and that would be the end of that.”

Melanie whipped to face him, inspiration in her eyes. “That is precisely the point,” she said with a mischievous smile.

“Oh, dear.” Frank could already tell he was going to have reservations about whatever she said next.

“I am going to fall off the terrace, and you are going to save me,” she said.

Frank eyes her askance. “If you say I am going to catch you safely when you drop four stories, I think you might misunderstand the principles of gravity.”

“No, not that,” Melanie laughed, skipping over to him and grabbing his arm. “I will be trapped, hanging off the balcony, and you will climb up the ivy that is growing on the side of the house to save me.”

“I doubt the ivy vines would hold me,” Frank said.

“They will if we fasten some sort of lattice or ladder underneath them,” Melanie said. “Then all you would need to do is climb up the ladder to fetch me.”

Frank raised one eyebrow suspiciously. “Do you truly think that will work?”

“There is only one way to find out,” Melanie said, grabbing his

hand and dashing back into the house with him.

Chapter 8

It was not the first utterly harebrained scheme Melanie had come up with in her life. It was not the first time she'd arranged for someone to climb up the side of a building as well. She, Charity, and Raina had climbed out of the window of their dormitory in the middle of the night once by using knotted-together bedsheets. Scaling down three stories to the mews of their school had been simple, so arranging for Frank to climb up the side of a country estate couldn't be any harder.

"Shift the ivy a bit this way so that it covers the end of the plank," Melanie directed Frank as they each leaned out a window in the room just below the terrace. "No one should be able to see that I'm actually supported by a plank instead of holding onto the railing for dear life."

"Right," Frank said, pulling some of the ivy away from the wall and looping it around the end of the plank.

They'd managed to fasten it to the railing above with a rope that wound along the underside of the plank, not unlike a swing she and Clementine had once constructed to hang from the railing at the top of the stairs in Twittingham Academy. It would be more than enough to make Melanie feel secure as she pretended to be in danger.

"That's done," Frank said when he was finished with the ivy, pulling back into the room. They were extraordinarily lucky that the room directly below the terrace was part of a series of rooms that made up the unused schoolroom in Fangfoss Manor. "Now for the ladder."

They stepped deeper into the room to retrieve the long, rope ladder that Frank had procured after asking some of the other servants in the house about how they would be able to escape from their rooms in the attic if there were a fire. As it turned out, several rope ladders for the purpose were stored in a small closet near the terrace, and Frank had been able to take one without anyone noticing.

"When do you think Lord and Lady Fangfoss will have children to occupy this schoolroom?" Frank asked as the two of them worked together to untangle the ladder.

"Frank!" Melanie exclaimed, her face heating giddily. "That is not

an appropriate topic to discuss with a lady."

"And why is that?" Frank laughed. "Is it because you do not want to think of Lady Fangfoss in the family way, or because you are anxious that you might beat her to it after yesterday." He flickered his eyebrows at her wickedly.

Melanie giggled and tried to focus on untangling the ladder. "That first thought is positively dreadful. I cannot—no, I do not want to imagine it at all." She laughed harder as she did just that, though it was painful to imagine her former teacher succumbing to Lord Fangfoss's seductions in any way.

"And the latter?" Frank asked, inching closer to her as their hands brushed against each other over the rope.

He leaned so close that Melanie could smell his enticing scent. Her heart fluttered and she had a hard time concentrating on anything but his mouth. As excited as she was by the prospect of being able to open her store with Frank's help, she was becoming increasingly enamored of the idea of having Frank with her to take care of other things. Their interlude in the boathouse the day before had been glorious and exciting, but it would have been immensely more so if they had been fully undressed, in a lovely, cool bed, and able to take their time and explore each other.

"The ladder," she said, deliberately mistaking his words, "should be what we are concerned with at this moment."

Frank laughed seductively and leaned even closer to her. "Yes, I am deeply concerned with ladders and other things that can help one get up at the moment."

Melanie laughed out loud, pushing Frank's shoulder. "That was a poor metaphor and you know it."

"Forgive me if I could not figure out any other ways to *insert* a double-entendre into the conversation," he teased her. "It is so *hard* to invent clever turns of phrase when one has been *thrust* into a situation where concentration is necessary."

Melanie laughed so hard she snorted. "Bad, bad, bad," she told him, shaking her head.

"Yes, I am," Frank said, dropping his end of the ladder once it was untangled. "I am very bad."

He stepped over the pile of rope on the floor and swept Melanie into his arms. She giggled as he did, then sighed happily as he slipped his arms around her and pulled her close. It felt like the most natural thing in the world for her to embrace him in return and part her lips for a kiss when he pressed into her. His mouth fit so deliciously against hers, and the taste of him was like ambrosia to her. It was mad to think that she'd known him for such a short time, but already she couldn't imagine her life without him.

“Melanie,” he murmured her name, inching back.

“Hmm?” she asked, realizing a bit late that her eyes were closed.

She opened them as he said, “We need to position this ladder down the side of the house and cover it with ivy so that we can carry out our nefarious plan.”

“Oh, that,” Melanie sighed. She stepped back from Frank with a laugh and reached for the ladder they’d dropped.

Together, they carried the rope ladder to the window, laying the bulk of it over the sill.

“What are you meant to fasten the ends to?” Melanie asked, glancing around the floor for something like hooks to hold the looped ends of the ladder.

“Furniture?” Frank said with a shrug. “Anything that will hold someone’s weight once they’re climbing?”

The closest thing available was a bureau that Melanie assumed was supposed to hold infant clothes. “Will this do?” she asked, taking one loose end of the rope and stepping over to the bureau.

“I suppose it will have to,” Frank said.

They worked together, moving the heavy bureau closer to the window. Frank lifted the bottom while Melanie slipped the ends of the ladder under the bureau’s feet so that they would hold. Once that was done, they returned to the window and pushed the rest of the ladder out. It unfurled, reaching almost all the way down to the ground.

“If you ask me, this is a very poor design for saving servants from a fire,” Melanie said as she leaned out the window to study the lay of the ladder.

“It is a terrible design,” Frank agreed, poking his head and shoulders out beside her. “But I suppose it’s better than being trapped four stories up with no way to exit the house.”

Melanie shuddered at the very idea as she leaned over to cover the parts of the ladder that she could reach with ivy. The gesture had her bend double over the sill and reaching farther than she thought she would be able to.

“My, what an intriguing pose that is,” Frank teased her from inside the room.

Melanie yelped and pulled back into the room, standing straighter. “You would not dare to assess my backside while I am in such a vulnerable position, sir, would you?” she teased him, reaching a hand behind her.

“I believe I would assess and admire your backside from any position, madam,” Frank teased her right back.

He pulled her into his arms again, and before Melanie knew it, their mouths were fused together once more. She sighed with happiness at the kiss, wondering how she had come to be so lucky.

That thought brought a litany of others with it. She was lucky. She was lucky to have found a man whom she admired instead of one she would feel obligated to marry to fulfill her family's wishes. Her affection for Frank had grown by leaps and bounds every time they spent time together. He was everything she had hoped she'd find in a man but didn't think actually existed. And the way he made her body feel was beyond wicked. Perhaps she would have to thank Lady Fangfoss for hosting the house party after all. And to think that she had considered the woman mad and had been insulted by the implication of her invitation.

"We need to make certain the ladder isn't visible from the outside," Frank murmured against her lips as he broke their kiss.

"What ladder?" Melanie sighed. She grinned cheekily up at him, proving that she did, in fact, know what he was talking about.

"The ladder that will lead to our own, delightful heaven," Frank answered.

Melanie laughed. "You have a way with words, Frank Crymble." She stepped away from him, moving to shut the schoolroom windows.

"It's because I'm Irish," Frank answered. "Something about blarney."

Melanie grinned at him as they finished with the windows, then headed for the hall. "I think it could be argued that everything we're doing today is blarney," she said, one eyebrow raised.

Frank brushed his hand against hers as they hurried along the hall and down the stairs, trying their best not to be seen. Most of the houseguests were in the back garden, enjoying an outdoor concert that afternoon, but there was always a chance of someone wandering the halls. Even the servants might inform Lady Fangfoss that her guests weren't where she wanted them to be.

"This whole thing is mad," Frank agreed. "But in my experience, a man needs to do mad things now and then to get what he wants."

"The risk is worth the reward," Melanie agreed with a nod as they reached the ground floor and hurried toward the nearest door that would take them outside. "And you are worth the risk, Frank Crymble."

"You truly think so?" Frank asked as they stepped out into the morning sunlight.

Melanie paused and turned to him. "Of course I do," she said with a smile. "I am about to put my life at risk so that you can come rescue me, after all."

"I would have fought that dragon for you, if we'd been able to find one," Frank said. They continued along the side of the house until they reached the spot where the rope ladder hung, but instead of going straight to work concealing it in the ivy, Frank swept Melanie

into his arms again. “I mean it, you know,” he said, holding her close. “I would fight a dragon for you.”

“Then you might end up battling my Aunt Rosalyn,” Melanie said with a grin, slipping her arms over his shoulders so that she could thread her fingers through his thick, red hair.

“I’ll just go fetch my sword at once.” Frank grinned right back at her.

He was so very handsome. It wasn’t as though Melanie hadn’t noticed before, but in that moment, smiling at her as the two of them planned a truly baffling trick to convince her father that Frank was a hero worthy of her hand, he was the most handsome man she’d ever laid eyes on. There was a joy about him that filled her with confidence and excitement. Her plans to build a department store had always felt like a grueling war she needed to wage to fulfill her life’s purpose. But now, the prospect of building that store and achieving that dream with Frank made everything feel as though it were a wild adventure they were about to depart on. They could conquer the world together.

And it struck her, right in that moment. She didn’t just want to marry Frank because he was a sound investment and a means to her ends. She didn’t just want to spend the rest of her life with him because their union would mean he could fulfill his dreams as well. She wanted to be Frank Crymble’s wife because she loved him. Love had snuck up on her. It had toyed with her and made her think it was something else—lust, ambition, defiance of convention. But there it was, staring her in the face. She was magnificently, improbably, blissfully in love.

“You have stars in your eyes, Miss Pennypacker,” Frank said in a soft, rich voice, returning the look she gave him with a matching one of his own.

“I do?” Melanie asked. Could it be possible that Frank loved her too? If he did, there was no force in the world—not her father, not society, not the disapproval of her friends—that could stop her from marrying him.

“It’s lovely,” Frank said, dropping his voice to an amorous purr.

He leaned in to capture her mouth in another kiss, but before their lips could meet, a yelp sounded from nearby. Melanie and Frank leapt apart, only to find Nancy, the kitchen maid gaping at them.

“I beg your pardon, Miss Pennypacker, Frank,” the startled young woman said, still gaping.

“Nancy,” Frank gasped the maid’s name in relief, but stepped away from Melanie all the same. Melanie supposed she couldn’t blame him for his relief. They could have been in a world of trouble if, say, her father had happened upon them kissing. “We were just, er….” Frank floundered his explanation.

“There’s no need to tell me,” Nancy squeaked. “I’ll just be going.”

The young woman dashed back around the corner of the house on whatever errand she’d been on. Melanie exchanged a wary look with Frank that said just how close they’d both come to disaster.

“We had better get on with things,” Melanie said, her eyes wide.

“You’re right,” Frank agreed. “The longer we drag this out, the more opportunity for disaster we have.”

“And frankly,” Melanie said, her smile returning as she played with one of the buttons on Frank’s jacket, “I am eager to make our engagement as formal as possible so that we can speed the wedding along.”

“And everything that *comes* after,” Frank added with a wink.

Melanie laughed and swatted his arm. “You are horrible,” she said.

“I know, but you’re the one who asked me to marry you,” Frank reminded her.

“Which is something we won’t be able to do unless we carry out this mad plan,” she reminded him.

“Right.” He slipped in to steal a quick kiss, then pulled away from her. “I’ll go fetch your father and Avery. I’ll convince them to come on a walk with me, as if I am making one final bid to convince your father to allow me to marry you.”

“And I’ll rush back to the terrace and climb over the edge to pretend I fell over,” Melanie said, suddenly giddy with excitement over the plan. “I can pretend that I’ve located my cigarette case and that I was reaching over to fetch it when I took a tumble.”

“Do be careful,” Frank said, pinching his face with concern for a moment. “Hang on to that railing with everything you have.”

“I will, I will,” Melanie insisted, stepping away from him.

“And make certain your feet are secured on the plank,” he added.

“Very secure,” Melanie said with a nod. “You be careful climbing up the rope ladder as well.”

“Of course.” Frank put on a mock solemn look.

“You will make the perfect hero when you rescue me.” Melanie grinned, stepping back into Frank and grabbing the lapels of his jacket. “And once I am safe on the ground and in your arms, there is a small matter I’d like to discuss with you.”

“A small one?” Frank echoed with an affectionate grin.

“Something I’d like to say to you.” She glanced up at him coyly, batting her lashes.

“I cannot wait to hear what it is.” Frank grinned from ear to ear. “There is something I’d like to say back to you as well.”

Melanie’s breath caught in her lungs. He did love her after all. “Then we’d better hurry,” she said, pushing away from him at last. “One quick prank, and as soon as it’s done, everyone will see that the

two of us were meant to be.”

Chapter 9

Melanie raced up through the house, attempting to avoid as many people as she could along the way. That was made easier by the fact that most everyone was listening to the outdoor concert Lady Fangfoss had planned for that afternoon.

She was unable to escape everyone entirely, though.

As she rounded the landing on the second floor and headed up to the servants' floor, Raina stepped out of one of the rooms near the stairs and said, "Oh, Melanie, I wondered if ye might help me—"

"I cannot," Melanie called back over her shoulder as she hitched up her skirts and continued to fly up the stairs. "Mischief afoot. True love. This ought to clinch it."

"What in the name of all that's holy is that supposed to mean?" Raina called after her.

Melanie ignored her, turning another corner on the stairs and dashing up the final flight to the corridor of servants' rooms. She hurried down the hall to the terrace, her heart in her throat. This was the moment she'd been waiting for. She was certain that the plot she and Frank had hatched, as silly as it was, would accomplish its purpose. She wouldn't be in any real danger, Frank would be lauded as a hero for rescuing her, and her father would happily give his consent for the two of them to wed.

As she burst out onto the terrace, she clasped her hand to her heart and tried to catch her breath. Married. Her. She never would have imagined it. Even though that was ostensibly the entire purpose of her long stay in England. She had always considered herself too proud and too ambitious to deign to wed some stuffy English lord, but there she was, poised on the precipice of doing exactly what Lady Fangfoss had brought her to Yorkshire to do.

The difference in what Lady Fangfoss thought she was accomplishing and what Melanie was about to do was Frank. Frank made all the difference in the world. Melanie hurried to the iron railing at the edge of the terrace and looked over, searching for Frank. She caught sight of him as he rounded the corner of the house with her father and Lord Carnlough, just as he said he would. Even so high

above him, Melanie could make out how dashing and handsome he was. His red hair was so different from what was expected of a normal, staid gentleman. And even though Frank might not have been able to claim the nobility of his birth, the nobility of his character made up for it in every way.

She loved him. It was as pure and simple as that. As she hiked up her skirts again and climbed over the railing to take her position on the side of the house, her heart blossomed with that love. She never would have imagined she'd find and fall in love with such a brilliant man, and certainly not so quickly. Time was irrelevant when it came to matters of the heart, she thought as she lowered herself down to the plank she and Frank had hidden in the ivy. Some people could know each other their entire lives and still not truly fall in love, but others—

As soon as she put her weight on the hidden plank, a loud crack cut her thoughts short. The plank had been stable and sturdy when she first stepped on it, but after the crack, it wobbled and tilted heavily to one side. Melanie let out an involuntary scream and grabbed hold of the bottom of the iron railing for all she was worth. This wasn't the plan at all. She was supposed to feel perfectly safe and secure as she waited for Frank to climb up and rescue her. The plank should have held—

She screamed again as the plank slipped out of the rope harness she thought she'd constructed so well and clattered to the ground. Melanie sagged with it, her feet flailing in midair as she did her best to hold on for her life.

"Frank!" she shouted in terror. "Frank, help!"

Her arms instantly began to ache, and she burst into tears of fear before she could stop herself. This was absolutely not how their ploy was supposed to unfold, and it was absolutely not the way she was meant to die.

"AND SO, YOU SEE," Frank explained to Mr. Pennypacker and Avery as he walked them around the house toward the terrace side, "the Australian railroad investment gave every indication of being a wise one. Between the government contracts at stake and the reputation of the men organizing the project, I was certain it was a sure bet."

Mr. Pennypacker grunted. "It would seem as though you did your research," he said, rubbing his chin. "And very wisely, I might add. But there's no telling what will happen with business."

"Agreed, sir." Frank nodded to Melanie's father, glanced hopefully to Avery, and when Avery sent him a shrewd, almost proud and approving look in return, Frank smiled. Whether they believed the plot to rescue Melanie from certain doom was genuine or not, Frank was half convinced that Mr. Pennypacker would change his mind

about the marriage based on his business sense alone.

He glanced up at the roof, where he'd spotted Melanie getting into place for their prank just moments before. His admiration for her courage and mischievousness knew no bounds. But just as he focused on her again, the plank that she was supposed to be standing on twisted in the ropes that held it and went clattering to the ground.

"What in God's name," Mr. Pennypacker began.

Frank didn't stick around to hear the rest of his oath. He dashed forward as Melanie screamed and cried out, "Frank!" as she dangled from the bottom of the terrace railing. Panic lashed him as he sprinted to the base of the house, where the end of the rope ladder swung lazily in the breeze.

"Frank, help!"

"I'm coming," he shouted up at Melanie. "Hold on! Just hold on!"

Without thinking, he scrambled up the ladder. Or at least tried to. No sooner had he thrown his weight on it than the whole thing jerked and lowered by several feet. He whipped his head up to the schoolroom window to see what was the matter, and his heart sank at the sight of the bureau they'd fastened the other end of the ladder to flush against the window.

He started his climb again, praying that the bureau would hold, now that it was right up against the window, and that the top end of the ladder would stay looped around its feet. Nothing else mattered a whit as he pulled himself up the ladder hand over hand. He was vaguely aware of more people rushing around the end of the house as Melanie's screams became more frantic, but it didn't matter. He had one goal and one goal only, to reach Melanie.

Another flaw in their plan presented itself once he made it to the very top of the ladder. There was still a good five feet between the base of the schoolroom window and Melanie's feet.

"Frank," Melanie gasped, her voice hoarse and shaking. "Thank God you're here."

"I am here, my love. I'm right here," he assured her, even as his mind worked fretfully to figure out how to bridge the final few feet between them.

"I can't hold on much longer," Melanie wept. Frank could see her shaking. "This was not the way the plan was supposed to progress."

"No, it is not," Frank said, laughing a bit to reassure her. "I think you need to figure out a way to climb down to me," he went on, frowning at the scant materials they had to work with.

"I can't," Melanie sobbed. "The plank is gone. It was supposed to support me."

Frank thought as fast as he could. "The rope from the plank is still there, though. Can you reach it with your feet?"

Melanie made a strangled sound, then flailed with her feet. Miraculously, she caught part of the rope with her toe, then wriggled first one foot, then the other around it. “I’ve got it,” she cried out. “I’ve got it.”

“Good, brilliant,” Frank encouraged her. “Now, can you let go of the rail and find handholds in the stonework until you lower yourself enough to grab the rope with your hands?”

“I don’t think I have much choice,” she moaned.

“I’ll be right here the whole time, and I’ll catch you if you fall,” he told her.

It was a hollow promise. If she fell, he would catch her, but with no one to catch him, they’d fall to their deaths. It would be a fair payment, though. He’d gotten the two of them into this mess, and beyond that, he wasn’t sure he wanted to live without her.

“Good job,” he told her as she put everything she had into climbing down the side of the wall. “That’s it. You’ve got it. Just a little farther. One hand at a time.”

Frank had no idea how she did it, but Melanie climbed and fought her way down until she was clinging to the rope that had contained the plank, like a monkey. From there, it was much easier for her to lower herself to the point where she could let go and slip into Frank’s arms. Not that Frank had an arm to spare, however. Melanie climbed over his head and onto his back so that she could grip him around the neck for dear life. She trembled violently as he began descending the ladder. He didn’t care if he was climbing down too fast for safety as long as he and Melanie could be on the ground and out of danger.

As soon as their feet touched the ground, Frank let go of the rope and twisted so that he could clamp his arms around Melanie in an embrace as though he would never let her go. Melanie let out a wail of terror and relief and buried her face against his neck. To both of their surprise, a round of applause from what appeared to be the entire complement of houseguests swelled as the rescue was completed.

Although not everyone was applauding.

“What in the devil’s name was that display of madness?” Mr. Pennypacker boomed, his face pale and splotchy. He took a step toward Melanie as if he would embrace her, then stopped short, quivering with rage instead. “Have you cracked, girl?”

“Papa, I can explain,” Melanie broke away from Frank, still shaking. She wiped her tear-streaked face with the back of her hand.

“Do you expect me to believe that a ladder just happened to be in place against the side of the house precisely where you appeared to be in peril?” Mr. Pennypacker raged on. “Or that it was mere coincidence that Mr. Crymble here would drag me away from a concert to walk

precisely to this spot."

"It wasn't supposed to happen like this, Papa," Melanie said, her voice an uncharacteristic squeak, lowering her head.

"I should say not," Mr. Pennypacker continued to bellow. He glared at Frank. "Was this or was this not a deliberate attempt to win my favor by staging some sort of mad-capped rescue?"

"Sir, I can explain," Frank started, stepping back to Melanie's side and putting his arm around her shoulders.

"I need no explanation," Mr. Pennypacker growled, apparently contradicting himself. "I know my daughter. This is not the first time she has climbed too high in a tree or attempted to walk the ridgepole of a roof or some such nonsense. My daughter does not know how to take care of herself, and it would appear, sir, that you do not possess the sort of sense that is needed to take care of her."

"Papa, that is not fair," Melanie told him, though her face was still red and puffy with tears, and her voice still shook. Frank loved her dearly for her strength, but she did not appear particularly strong at that moment.

"Pack your things, Melanie," Mr. Pennypacker told her with a dark frown. "You and I are departing for London at once, and as soon as a steamer becomes available, we will be returning to Philadelphia."

"Papa, no," Melanie protested, but it was all for naught. Her father stepped forward and grabbed her hand, pulling her away from Frank.

"Oh, Mr. Pennypacker, this is quite a muddle," Lady Fangfoss said, jumping forward from the ring of houseguests watching the scene as Mr. Pennypacker tried to lead Melanie away. Frank leapt after them, but had to dodge not only Lady Fangfoss, but one of the footmen, Bill, as he did. "I trust you will not spread reports of this unfortunate event throughout London," Lady Fangfoss continued.

"I just might," Mr. Pennypacker grumbled as he tugged Melanie toward the nearest door into the house.

Frank continued to follow them, but even when Lady Fangfoss stepped aside, Bill tried to distract him. "Frank," he whispered, waving a small piece of paper. "Frank, this has come for you."

"Not now," Frank hissed, raising a hand to ward Bill off.

"Papa, please stop dragging me about like a heroine in some tragic, gothic novel," Melanie protested, a bit more strength in her voice, as they made it into the house and through the conservatory to the main foyer.

"If you would stop behaving like some cunning damsel in distress, I might just consider unhanding you," Mr. Pennypacker said. "I have had enough of your nonsense for one lifetime."

"Then let me marry Frank," she said. "I'll be off your hands for good."

Frank couldn't bear to watch Mr. Pennypacker push Melanie around for another moment. He was her father, but he was also a man without a clear view of the situation.

"I love her," he called out, intent on making things as clear as possible.

Mr. Pennypacker and Melanie had stepped up onto the bottom stairs, and the bulk of the houseguests had crowded into the hall with them, as though the scene were just another of Lady Fangfoss's mandatory fun performances and the stairs were a stage.

"I love Melanie," Frank went on, stepping up to the stair where Melanie stood and taking her hands as she shook away from her father. "That is why I want to marry her. Not because she has money or connections, and not because she is an ambitious businesswoman. Although that does appeal to me in so many ways. I want to marry her because I love her with my whole heart."

"Oh, Frank," Melanie said. She had tears in her eyes again, but for an entirely different reason.

He shifted to look at Mr. Pennypacker, but kept a firm grip on Melanie's hands. "Yes, we were unaccountably stupid to attempt the prank we just tried. We never would have had to go to such extremes if you had just opened your heart to the idea that an American buccaneer and an Irish bastard could have more in common than you imagine. We are determined to conquer the world, and we want to do it together." He turned to Melanie once more. "Because I love this woman," he said. "I love her so dearly. And I did not need a near disaster to say as much. Melanie, I'm sorry that I put you in danger. I'm sorry that I couldn't trust our love to win the day."

"No, Frank, I am sorry," Melanie said, gazing tenderly up at him. "The rescue was my idea. I shouldn't have been so dramatic. But I love you too, and I would do anything to be your wife."

"Never," Mr. Pennypacker interrupted what had the makings of a beautiful and tender scene. "I will never allow this." He grabbed Melanie's arm and wrenched her away from Frank. "My dear, you are going upstairs to your room and you are going to pack. Now." He started up the stairs again, taking Melanie with him, but when he was halfway up to the landing, he turned back to Frank and said, "This is the end of your wicked schemes, sir. I truly hope that you get what you deserve."

He turned to continue up the stairs, but Melanie stopped him. She yanked her arm out of his grip, stood her ground, and shouted, "Enough of this. I am through playing the sweet, biddable young maiden."

Chapter 10

Melanie thought it was entirely fitting that she had an audience for her declaration to her father.

"Papa, I will not stand here and let you order my life as though I am just another investment," she declared. "You sent me away to Miss Julia's finishing school—"

"It's Lady Fangfoss now," Lady Fangfoss interrupted.

Melanie glared at her before continuing with, "—and you barely kept in touch with me for all these years."

"Melanie," her father said, just a bit sheepish as he glanced between her and the throng of people at the bottom of the stairs, "there is a great deal of distance between Philadelphia and England. Even the swiftest mail takes quite some time to travel."

"Regardless, you set me loose on my own, with only Aunt Rosalyn to watch over me. And I am not complaining." Melanie stood straighter, holding a hand up in her defense. "I am most certainly not complaining. I thrived with your neglect. I learned everything I could about the things that interest me—commerce and the building of department stores. And that is precisely why I have had enough of you treating me as though I am some fainting debutante whose only ambition is to marry well."

"There is nothing wrong with marrying well," Angeline said so quietly from her place by Rothbury's side at the bottom of the stairs that Melanie almost didn't hear her.

Melanie let out a guilty breath and dropped her shoulders. "I'm not saying there is, for everyone, dearest. I'm simply saying that it is unjustifiable for my father to let me go, only to attempt to drag me back again at the precise moment when my life is filled with everything I most want, even things I did not realize I wanted."

Melanie turned to Frank, clasping his hands again. "I love you, Frank. I should have told you sooner. I should have recognized it sooner," she said with a teasing look.

"I don't see how you could have recognized it sooner," Olive called up from her place in the audience by Mr. Prince's side. "You've only known each other for a few weeks."

“Yes, Olive, dear, I know,” Melanie said, more perturbed by the interruption than her friend’s observation. “The point is, I love you, Frank. And come what may, whether my father gives his consent or not—” she glanced over her shoulder to her father with a stern look, then turned back to Frank, “—I intend to marry you. Even if we have to start at the very bottom, as poor shopkeepers with nothing to their name but the name itself. And that name will be Crymble.”

“How surprisingly romantic,” Charity said, grinning at Lord Wilton.

“Yes, very romantic,” Melanie’s father grumbled. “But you will find, my dear, that you cannot eat romanticism, and you cannot feed a family on it either. And knowing the antics that the two of you seem to want to get up to, I’m certain there will be children in no time at all.”

Melanie’s face flared hot, and once again, she wondered if her father had some miraculous sense that let him know what she and Frank had done the day before. “Be that as it may,” she said, then cleared her throat before going on, “I have no fear of living a more challenging life with Frank, because both Frank and I are resourceful, clever, and business-minded.”

“I’m certain we’ll make something of ourselves,” Frank said, fixing her with an impish, triumphant look. “Even if I’m as poor as a church mouse right now, between the two of us, I have no doubt we’ll be the toast of London society and that we’ll be hosting our own house party in no time at all.”

From the edge of the crowd of the guests, the footman who had been pursuing Frank cleared his throat loudly and held up the scrap of paper he was carrying.

“How very dramatic of you, my dear,” her father said before the poor footman could open his mouth. “But mark my words, you will rue the day that you broke from me to throw your lot in with this red-headed upstart.”

“Am I breaking from you?” Melanie asked him, turning so that she stood by Frank’s side, facing her father with him. “Or are you rejecting me simply because I no longer fit the role you had assigned to me.”

“Excuse me, Frank, you really need to look at this,” the footman whispered, starting up the stairs.

“It is not a role I assigned to you, Melanie,” her father insisted. “It is a role society has deemed proper for you as a woman. Look around.” He gestured to the mass of people watching them. “Do you see any other young ladies flaunting convention and defying their father’s wishes in public? Do you see any of them making a spectacle of themselves that would have them packed off to Bedlam?”

Melanie glanced down at her friends. If her father only knew half the things her friends had gotten up to in the past. Men, and society in general, hadn't the slightest idea what sort of things women were capable of. They erroneously believed that all women were soft and domestic, that they followed the rules at all times, and that they wouldn't dream of breaking out of the rigid role that society had carved out for them. But women were more than capable of being precisely who they wanted to be, whether the rest of society knew it or not. If her father wished to continue to think that he alone was capable of greatness, then he was merely avoiding the truth that would catch up with them all one day.

"Frank," the footman hissed again, only two stairs down from where Frank and Melanie stood. "You *need* to take a look at this."

"Oh, get on with it," Melanie's father growled. "Put that silly man out of his misery and look at that telegram before the lad expires on the spot."

Frank sent Melanie's father a wary look before stepping down to take the paper from the footman. "Thank you, Bill," he said with an apologetic look, then opened the paper.

A moment later, Frank's eyes went wide with shock. Then his mouth pulled into a smile. That smile grew to something that Melanie could only describe as a giggle before he glanced up at her, his face shining with triumph.

"They got the wrong railroad," he said, breaking out into a laugh and stepping up to Melanie's side. "The original report was wrong. They mistook the *Australian* railroad for an *Austrian* railroad. It was all just an error of communication."

"It…it was?" Melanie blinked rapidly, catching his grin and resting a hand on his arm.

Frank nodded. "The *Australian* railroad, the one I invested in, is a smashing success. My investment has quadrupled several times over." He stood straighter, grinning wickedly at Melanie. "Miss Pennypacker, you are engaged to a dazzlingly wealthy man."

A collective gasp sounded from the people watching them below.

"What is this?" Melanie's father asked with a curious frown. He stepped closer and Frank handed him the telegraph.

"My research and calculations were correct after all," Frank told him with pride. "The railroad has been extraordinarily profitable already, and there is speculation that its value will only increase with time. I am a wealthy man." He glanced to Melanie with a flicker of one eyebrow that had Melanie's heart singing. "I wonder what I'll invest in next."

"So your speculation has been profitable after all?" Lord Rothbury asked, stepping up to the bottom of the stairs, a look of interest in his

eyes.

"It has been, my lord," Frank said with a cunning grin. "Perhaps you might reconsider my offer to invest?"

"If there is conversation about investments to be had, I believe I would like to be a part of it," Lord Dorset added, stepping forward as well.

"So would I." A hush seemed to descend over the scene as the Duke of Cashingham stepped forward, joining the other two at the front of the crowd. "I would be quite interested to learn what you mean by your research and calculations, sir. If you have a formula for investing, I should like to know what it is."

The hush burst into a flurry of excited whispers. Cashingham was the clear prize for all of the ladies in attendance, but having the approval—and potentially the friendship—of a duke was as much a badge of honor for a gentleman as well as a lady. Melanie's heart raced at the thought. If Frank gained the support of the duke, it wouldn't matter that he had been born a bastard, the two of them would be accepted, to some degree, in the highest circles of society.

"Have you changed your mind yet, Papa?" Melanie asked with an arch look for her father. "Have you reconsidered whether my marriage to Frank—a successful businessman in possession of a fortune who is friends with dukes and marquesses—is ill-advised?"

Her father pursed his lips and frowned, but the antagonism was gone from his expression, replaced by a wily look of defeat. "I will concede that you've won this round, my dear," he said. "Though how you orchestrated this particular magic trick is beyond me."

"Your daughter is a brilliant woman, sir," Frank said.

"And an excellent judge of character," Melanie added with a wink.

"Hear, hear!" Angeline called from the bottom of the stairs, then clapped a hand over her mouth when everyone stared at her.

"Frank has always been the very best of men," Lord Carnlough agreed with his sister, though in more eloquent words. "I am proud to call him family."

The air nearly whooshed out of Melanie's lungs. If Lord Carnlough was publicly acknowledging Frank at long last, then Frank's luck truly had changed.

Melanie turned back to her father with a triumphant look. "Am I to take it that Frank and I have your permission to marry now, Papa?" she said, unable to wipe the grin from her face.

Her father smiled and threw up his hands. "You do," he said. "And I, too, would be interested in learning your investment strategy, Mr. Crymble," he added.

That was the final endorsement Frank needed. Melanie's father gestured to the two of them, and when Melanie turned to Frank, he

took her hand in his, raised it to his mouth, and kissed it with a look that was far from chaste. As he did, first Angeline, then the rest of her friends, then all of the houseguests broke into applause.

"It seems I have another fine match to my credit," Lady Fangfoss squealed in excitement.

Melanie and Frank exchanged a wry look. They were responsible for their own match, but as long as it kept Lady Fangfoss happily out of their business, Melanie would gladly let her take credit.

The scene was over, and since the afternoon was moving along toward supper, as soon as the audience broke up to go their own ways, Melanie let out a sigh.

"I should probably change out of these dirty clothes and into something suitable for supper," she said as Frank accompanied her up the stairs. Indeed, her skirt and blouse were streaked with dirt from the side of the house.

"Do you need any help?" Frank asked, leaning close to her ear.

They were near the top of the stairs, her father had opted to join the rest of the houseguests instead of following them, so Melanie laughed out loud. Her face flooded with heat, and she quickly glanced around to make certain no one was near enough to overhear them, or to follow them, for that matter.

"I could use the help of an experienced valet to help me undress," she murmured, then grabbed Frank's hand and tugged him down the hall.

They were able to make it to her room at the far end of the hall without being seen. As soon as they entered the room and shut and locked the door behind them, Melanie burst into giggles and threw herself into Frank's arms. He wasted no time embracing her in return and kissing her giggles into long, deep sighs.

"Isn't this putting the cart before the horse a bit?" she asked breathlessly as she undid the buttons of his jacket while backpedaling toward her bed.

"Are you saying you wish to stop?" he asked, pulling back a bit to send her an incredulous look.

Melanie giggled and worked through his buttons even faster. "No, not at all."

He made a sound that was something between a growl and a laugh and tugged her blouse out from her skirt. Melanie couldn't move fast enough to get him out of his clothes or to have him remove hers. In spite of what they'd done the other day, she still hadn't seen him fully naked, and she was hungry for the sight.

"For a valet, you certainly are careless with clothing," she panted as he tossed her blouse aside and reached behind her to unfasten her skirts.

“My specialty is in men’s clothing,” he said with a growl, loosening her skirt and petticoats so that he could push them down over her hips.

Melanie laughed in spite of herself. “I could understand that in so many different ways.”

He laughed as well, but it didn’t stop him from hurrying through the rest of her clothes. “Unlike some friends of mine, I am exclusively interested in women.” He started to kiss her, then pulled back. “No, that is not accurate.”

Melanie’s heart caught in her throat. “It isn’t?” She blinked at him, a bit worried.

Frank’s grin widened. “I am only interested in you,” he said, then kissed her in earnest.

From there, it was only a matter of minutes before all of their clothes were strewn across the floor as the two of them tumbled into Melanie’s bed. Frank was everything she’d imagined he would be, and even though he tried to spread her across the sheets on her back, she managed to muscle herself above him so that she straddled his thighs.

“It appears as though I am not just engaged to be married to a clever and wealthy man, I am about to marry a handsome man as well,” she said, running her hands over his chest and stomach. His light hair tickled her palms and made her ache with need for him. His muscles were well-defined but not bulky. His power came from the force of his character, not from brute strength. She loved it, and she bent down over him to capture his mouth as a way to show how much she liked it.

Frank hummed in approval and brushed his hands up her thighs to her backside as they kissed. His touch was magical, and she pressed into his hands, wanting to give him everything she had and more. The sensation was even better when he trailed his hands up her sides, digging his fingertips into her back for a moment, before shifting his hands around to cup her breasts. She nearly lost her breath as he caressed them, brushing his thumbs over her nipples and driving her wild with pleasure.

“You are the most beautiful woman in creation,” he sighed, gazing up at her.

“You’re a sight yourself,” she teased him with an arch of her eyebrow.

Frank laughed, then flipped her to her back so fast Melanie squealed. She snapped her mouth shut a moment later, afraid someone passing in the hall would hear them, but Frank had a better way of silencing her. He slanting his mouth over hers, sliding his tongue against hers and kissing her until her giggles became sighs.

Those sighs turned into moans as he trailed his hands down her

stomach to delve between her legs. She was already so primed and ready for him, and feeling his touch against the most sensitive part of her only intensified the ache of need within her. Without hesitation, she opened her legs wider for him, and when he took her up on her invitation and teased his fingers across her wetness, then stroked her clitoris, she moaned and bucked with the pleasure he gave her.

"Beautiful and wanton," Frank growled, stealing another kiss from her lips, then inching down so that he could take one of her breasts in his mouth.

"Yes, wanton for you," she panted. Everything he made her feel with his touch and with his kindness and fierce loyalty to her in the face of all of the opposition they'd encountered had her desperate to be one with him. "Please, Frank," she panted. "I need you. I need all of you. Now."

"Far be it for me to deny the requests of a ruthless buccaneer," Frank said with an impish wink.

He wasted no time positioning himself between her, then sinking slowly into her heat. The care that he took filling her was almost as good as if he'd thrust hard and claimed her. She felt every inch of him invading her and moaned with the pleasure it gave her.

"More, more," she panted when he was deep inside of her. "Make me yours."

It was the sort of thing women said in salacious novels, but she felt it with her entire being. And blessedly, Frank obliged. He balanced above her and jerked his hips, creating a powerful, penetrating rhythm that had her arching into him. She wanted everything that came with the sort of intimacy they were sharing, the ecstasy and the danger. She wanted him to fill her with his seed, and in turn, she wanted him to feel the deepest sort of pleasure possible.

She got her wish. The two of them moved together at an increasingly frantic pace, heedless of the sounds they made or how ridiculous they might look. It felt wonderful, precious, and sacred, and her heart exploded with love for him as her body throbbed into a powerful orgasm. She called out his name and clung to him as she rode the waves of her pleasure, and before she could come down from the heavens, Frank growled and jerked with his release, filling her.

It was just the beginning of a lifetime of magical moments, and as the two of them rocked together more slowly, eventually stopping and lying in a spent and panting tangle, Melanie's whole being was alive with joy.

"I love you so, Frank Crymble," she sighed. "And together, we will take on the world."

Epilogue

"Nay! I'll no' do it, and that is final!"

Lady Raina Prince folded her arms in front of her chest—which earned a scowl from her former finishing school teacher for her unladylike behavior—and frowned right back at the older woman.

"Now, Raina, dear," began the countess, but Raina interrupted her again.

"Miss Julia—Lady Fangfoss"—she hurried to correct herself before the woman did it for her—"ye ken I appreciate the invitation to yer lovely home. But I'm no' here to find myself a husband."

"And surely you know that finding a husband is precisely the reason I invited you!"

With a sigh, Raina rolled her shoulders, trying not to tighten defensively. She reminded herself that her older teacher really did care for her, and really did want the best for her, even if they disagreed on what that might be.

Raina glanced around, hoping for a distraction, or some other houseguest who happened to be enjoying the gardens at this early hour, or barring that, a minor miracle to save her from this conversation.

Nothing too large, oh Lord. Perhaps a wee fire, or an emergency inside. A rain of fish? Or an elephant.

Although even she had to admit that a rain of elephant might be a bit much.

"Lady Fangfoss," she tried again, "I have nae interest in marrying. I've told ye that so many times."

"You had plenty of interest in marrying at one point," the older woman pointed out sharply.

Raina winced. "That was…before I kenned the truth about the man." Ewan's father. The man who would've married her, thanks to her position as an earl's daughter.

The man she couldn't accept.

"Nevertheless, my dear, you are a beautiful young woman, and your position in society—"

"Has been bloody well ruined, and ye ken it as much as I."

Although the countess winced at Raina's bold statement, she didn't contradict it. Of course, she could've also been wincing at Raina's language, which the countess—as Miss Julia Twittingham at the Twittingham Academy—had done her best to correct.

To Raina's surprise, the older woman stepped forward, her skirts brushing against the dew-heavy grass, and took her hands.

"Raina, my dear," she began quietly, "You know I want you to be happy. You've always been one of my wildest girls, although I know your heart is good." She squeezed Raina's hands, her smile a little sad. "Hubert objected to inviting you to the party, you know, but I insisted." Well, that was news. "Although I'll admit myself surprised when you arrived with Ewan."

Raina's chin rose, and she met her former teacher's gaze squarely. She refused to apologize for bringing her son to the house party, because she'd done it very much on purpose: to remind the countess and the rest of society—and herself, for that matter—that she wasn't going to jump through their hoops.

Ewan was the most important person in her life, and she'd be damned before leaving him behind.

As if she could sense the unspoken words, Lady Fangfoss nodded slowly. "It was a shock, yes, but once I considered your words, I knew having your son here would be a comfort to you. That's why I allowed him to be installed in the nursery. I also know the two of you disappear for hours each day, and I have to say, I've never seen a happier lad."

The older woman's smile grew tremulous. "But Raina, you must see there's more to life than just one little lad. As a lady, you have obligations—to marry, to do good works, to bear other children."

With a small huff, Raina tugged her hands from the countess's, and stepped away, refusing to allow her expression to show the pang of yearning the older woman's words had caused. Not just the chance to do good works for others in the world, but more children…

Being Ewan's mother was the greatest joy in her life, and she knew she could be content with only him for the rest of her life. But the chance to give him a brother or sister, a playmate…

Straightening her shoulders, Raina tamped down the burst of longing. She'd made her decision years ago when she'd rejected one very important offer of marriage, and she didn't intend to regret it now.

Now would be a fabulous time for that rain of elephant, oh Lord.

When falling pachyderms failed to materialize, Raina decided that likely meant she was on her own.

"Lady Fangfoss, I…" She took a deep breath, trying to find words to explain. "I cannae agree to tie myself to a man, to subsume my

identity, just because ‘tis what is expected.” She hurried to continue, before the woman could object. “I ken it is a fine goal for some women, but…” She remembered what Ewan’s father had been like, how he’d acted when he’d proposed marriage. “It is no’ for me.”

“You don’t wish to be married, my dear?”

“I don’t wish to be married to a man who doesn’t love me.”

The countess’s eyes widened, her lips forming a little “oh” of understanding. Raina imagined she could hear the other woman’s brain frantically whirling, making connections and trying to understand what might’ve happened in the months after Raina left her school.

And she was likely guessing the truth.

Still, one had to admire her tenacity. “Raina, dear, this Friday is your turn to dance with the duke.”

Tenacity or not, Miss Julia was becoming damned annoying. “To hell with the Duke of Casteram!” Raina all but shouted, throwing her hands in the air and huffing in irritation as she turned away from the countess. “To hell with all the earls and marquesses and even the verra wealthy misters ye’ve invited to this party, Lady Julia!”

“Lady Fangfoss, dear, and the duke’s title is actually—”

Not caring if she’d gotten the bloody man’s bloody title bloody accurate, Raina reached for her skirts. “Then to hell with whatever his name really is!” What had been a peaceful morning walk before she went to collect Ewan from the nursery for their daily swim had turned into a surprising inquisition.

She eyed the sky.

Nae help from ye, oh Lord.

“Raina, it is your duty!” the countess called from behind her.

Duty to dance with a duke? Ha! Her one and only duty here was to her son. And possibly to her friends. And definitely to her own heart, which deserved the chance to be free.

That’s three duties.

Scowling, she wrenched her skirts higher and increased her pace, irritated at her own subconscious now.

She’d spent each Friday evening of this house party avoiding the gatherings Lady Fangfoss had planned, but Raina suspected this Friday she’d have to make herself extra scarce. As she rounded a corner of the house, putting herself out of view of the gardens, she slowed her pace. With a sigh, she dropped her skirts and rolled her shoulders again, trying to find her calm.

Perhaps Phin and Olive would help hide her this Friday. Or perhaps she might hide in the nursery with Ewan. From what her friends had told her, the Duke of WhateverHisNameWas had only been attending the Friday evening fêtes, interviewing each lady for the

position of his duchess, and he was as unlikable as a cold fish.

Which still had neglected to fall from the sky. Raina scowled up at the beautiful blue above her, dotted with fluffy clouds.

Well, that at least was a beautiful sight, was it not? It was a bit later than usual for her swim with Ewan, but today was a perfect day for it. They'd found a bend in the River Derwent near the edge of the Fangfoss estate where no one bothered them. Today was ideal.

Realizing she was smiling, Raina exhaled slowly, pushing aside the worry and irritation Lady Fangfoss had caused, and turned her steps toward the back stairs which would lead her up to her son.

Aye, today was a perfect day for a swim with her laddie, to remind herself what was really important in life.

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I hope you have enjoyed *The Buccaneer and the Bastard.* If you'd like to be the first to learn about when new books in the series come out and more, please sign up for my newsletter here: http://eepurl.com/cbaVMH And remember, Read it, Review it, Share it! For a complete list of works by Merry Farmer with links, please visit http://wp.me/P5ttjb-14F.

Merry Farmer is an award-winning novelist who lives in suburban Philadelphia with her cats, Torpedo, her grumpy old man, and Justine, her hyperactive new baby. She has been writing since she was ten years old and realized one day that she didn't have to wait for the teacher to assign a creative writing project to write something. It was the best day of her life. She then went on to earn not one but two degrees in History so that she would always have something to write about. Her books have reached the Top 100 at Amazon, iBooks, and Barnes & Noble, and have been named finalists in the prestigious RONE and Rom Com Reader's Crown awards.



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